Metropolitan Hilarion: The Russian Orthodox Church originated in Kiev, not in Moscow, not in St. Petersburg

Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, gave an interview to the TV channel RT.

– What can the Moscow Patriarchate do to support the Ukrainian Orthodox Church?

– First of all, we are praying for the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, for Ukraine and for the Ukrainian people. At every Liturgy we offer special petitions and prayers to God that He helps our Ukrainian brothers and sisters survive at this difficult time of persecution by the Ukrainian political authorities. I deliberately call it persecution because what is happening in Ukraine is evidently an intervention of the state in the internal affairs of the Churches. It was the state which initiated the process of granting autocephaly to two schismatic groups, unified with the view of receiving this document from the Patriarchate of Constantinople. It is the Ukrainian authorities which now insist that the Ukrainian Orthodox Church should change its name. However, according to the international norms, a Church itself should choose its name; it is not for the state to grant the Church a particular name. Yet, this is what is happening in Ukraine. We also note that many representatives of the Ukrainian authorities are considering measures aimed at transferring the property from the canonical Church to the newly created church organization. It concerns, in particular, the two great monasteries – the Kiev Caves Lavra and the Pochaev Lavra. Each of these monasteries has several hundred monks. Besides, the Kiev Theological Academy is located in the Kiev Caves Lavra. So, it is impossible to imagine what will happen to these monks and to the students of the Theological Academy, if these properties will be transferred to the newly created church organization which has not many, but just a few monks. It is not clear at all who will be living in these monasteries and what fate awaits the monks once they are expelled from their abodes. We hope very much that it will not happen, that, as Mr. Poroshenko said many times, each person will be able to choose to which church to go and that there will be no violent seizures of monasteries, churches or other properties.

– Some Orthodox Churches, like Polish, Serbian and Antiochian, have already voiced their stance, opposing what the Patriarchate of Constantinople did in Ukraine. Since you deal with the exterior relationships of the Russian Orthodox Church, can you tell us about the stance of other Orthodox Churches around the world?

– As of today, not a single Orthodox Church has expressed any support for the Patriarchate of Constantinople in its actions in Ukraine. No support was given either during the preliminary stages or

during the granting of “autocephaly,” and as far as I know, not a single letter of congratulations was sent to this newly created organization, in spite of the insistence of the Patriarch of Constantinople that the other Orthodox Churches should recognize it as a newly created autocephalous Church. We shall see how it goes in the future. It is difficult to predict the Churches’ reaction to a letter which they will receive from the Patriarch of Constantinople and in which he will invite them to recognize this new church organization. But as of today, as I said, there is no support for the actions of Constantinople. Three Orthodox Churches officially expressed their dissatisfaction, disagreement with and dismay at what is being done by the Patriarchate of Constantinople. Each of these Churches presented it in a different way. Especially strong was the wording of the Serbian Patriarchate and the Serbian bishops who openly expressed their disagreement with the whole course of actions taken by Constantinople. Very firm also is the position of the Patriarch of Antioch and the Metropolitan of Poland.

– At the moment the Russian Orthodox Church has nearly cut all ties with the Patriarchate of Constantinople. Are there any conditions for the relationships between the Moscow Patriarchate and the Patriarchate of Constantinople to be back in action again?

– I should remind you that it is not the first time in history when the Moscow Patriarchate is not in communion with the Patriarchate of Constantinople. There was a similar occasion in the mid-15th century when the Patriarch of Constantinople signed a union with Rome. Back then the bishops in Moscow elected their metropolitan without Constantinople’s consent, not because they did not want to receive such consent, but because there was no Orthodox Patriarch in Constantinople at the time. There was a Uniate Patriarch, and the Russian Church did not accept Uniatism. Later on, of course, other Patriarchs disagreed with the actions of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, and then it returned to Orthodoxy. But there were years, during which the Patriarchate of Constantinople, by being united with Rome, was not in communion with the other Churches, including the Russian Orthodox Church, subordinate to Constantinople at the time. Many people are asking how we are going to survive without communion with Constantinople. I should remind you that for almost ten centuries we have been surviving without communion with Rome, and from the point of view of the Church of Rome, the Church in the proper sense is the one eucharistically united with Rome, and we are not. They recognize our sacraments, our priesthood, but still their official documents state that we are lacking one of the essential marks of the Church, that is, communion with Rome. Now the Patriarchate of Constantinople in its papist aspirations decided to employ the same rhetoric, saying that the Orthodox Church is the one in communion with Constantinople. But what happens if the Patriarch of Constantinople himself is in schism or in heresy or if he acts contrary to the will of the other Orthodox Churches? We are in a situation when we cannot be in the Eucharistic communion with Constantinople and nobody knows how long it will continue, maybe again for ten centuries, like it is with the Church of Rome. Maybe it will be a shorter period. It will depend on Constantinople. They have done what they have done, and it is difficult to imagine that they will reverse their actions, so it is equally difficult to imagine that we will restore

communion with Constantinople.

– Now, unfortunately, when we are talking about Constantinople, we are talking about the new religious entity in Ukraine as well. In September, if I may quote you, you said that it is too early to compare the situation in Ukraine to the Nazi occupation of Eastern Europe. That was when all Jews had to wear a yellow Star of David on their clothing. A few months have passed already, and we are hearing more and more threats against representatives of the Moscow Patriarchate. The comparison that you made in September, is it more relevant now?

– This comparison is obviously more relevant now, because the Ukrainian state insists that the Ukrainian Orthodox Church should adopt a new name which must include the name of Russia as the "aggressor country," as they say. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church is not the Russian Church. It consists of the Ukrainians who were born in Ukraine, who are citizens of Ukraine and who are in no way citizens or agents of Russia. The only link that exists between the Ukrainian Church and the Moscow Patriarchate is the liturgical commemoration of the Patriarch. There is no other link. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate is a self-governing Church, which means that there is no administrative, financial or any other dependence on Moscow – there is only this spiritual link inherited from history, which helps us be and feel ourselves as one Church. The Russian Orthodox Church originated in Kiev, not in Moscow, not in St. Petersburg. Kiev is our baptismal font. We respect political borders, but we also expect political leaders to respect self-consciousness of the faithful in Russia, in Ukraine, in Byelorussia, in Moldova, and in other states in which the Russian Orthodox Church has its presence. Recently we have often heard from representatives of the Patriarchate of Constantinople that it recognizes the Moscow Patriarchate in the borders in which it existed at the end of the 16th century, when the Eastern Patriarchs recognized the Patriarch of Moscow as the fifth among them. They say that what happened afterwards was an unlawful expansion of the Russian Orthodox Church. It is very strange to hear these arguments, for they imply that the missionary work of the Russian Orthodox Church in the territories that were gradually added to the Russian Empire was something unlawful. They imply that the Russian Orthodox Church should have remained within the limits of the Moscow principalities, and that all new lands added to the Russian Empire should not have been an area of missionary activities of the Church. We cannot accept such arguments. We find them foolish and believe that the Patriarchate of Constantinople is very, very wrong in these deliberations.

– Orthodox Churches around the world have equal status, but Constantinople has always been the so-called first among equals. You said in your earlier interviews that this is no longer true. So, is there anybody who is playing this role now, or anybody who is to become the first among equals?

– In the diptych, which we currently use, the first is the Patriarch of Alexandria. I repeat that it is not the

first time when the Patriarch of Alexandria *de facto* occupies the first place. There was the Third Ecumenical Council which condemned the heretical Patriarch of Constantinople, Nestorius, and it was the Patriarch of Alexandria, Cyril, who played a leading role in denouncing Nestorius, convincing the bishops gathered together from all over the world that the teaching proclaimed by Patriarch Nestorius was a heretical one. So now in our diptych the Patriarch of Alexandria occupies the first place, but the first place in an Orthodox diptych is not something like the primacy of the Pope in the Catholic Church, because the Catholic Church has a unified structure, and the Pope is considered the head of the Church. According to the Orthodox ecclesiology, to the Orthodox teaching about the Church, Jesus Christ Himself is the Head of the Church. And administratively the Orthodox Church is a confederation (using the language of civil society and a comparison with a political structure) of independent Churches which are not subordinate to each other, even if by protocol they occupy certain places. It is, for example, like countries in the United Nations. They are listed in a certain order, but it does not mean that one country is subordinate to another one. In the same way, the Orthodox world has never known subordination of one Church to another Church. Now the Patriarchate of Constantinople wants to create such subordination, and the newly established organization in Ukraine is an “autocephalous church” (I say it in inverted commas), designed in accordance with the desires of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. It is not a truly independent Church, because the tomos granted to it lays down many conditions on which it receives this so-called “autocephaly.” One of the conditions is that it should recognize the Patriarch of Constantinople as their head. Another condition is that any bishop and any clergyman, even priest or deacon, from this so-called “church of Ukraine” can appeal to the Patriarch of Constantinople, if he disagrees with his own bishop or with his own church authorities, and it is the Patriarch of Constantinople who will resolve such matters. Besides, this “church” is deprived of the right to establish parishes in the Diaspora. In practice it will mean that the Ukrainians who are living in the Diaspora, and there are many of them in Italy, Spain, Portugal and other European countries, as well as in the USA, will go to parishes of the Russian Orthodox Church, as they do now. Even if they wanted to go to the Ukrainian parishes, there is no such possibility for this newly created church organization.

– There is a new religious entity in Ukraine at the moment. Does it have a future, in your opinion, and what kind of future awaits this new religious entity? Can we talk about long term, short term or we cannot predict anything at this point?

– I do not think I should predict what will happen in the future. I only deeply regret that the Patriarchate of Constantinople took this position. It is clear to me that it is a revenge for non-participation of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Council of Crete which was convoked by the Patriarch of Constantinople and in which we did not take part because of non-participation of several other Churches. For some reasons the Patriarch of Constantinople believes that the Russian Orthodox Church prompted these other Churches, namely the Churches of Antioch, Bulgaria and Georgia, not to attend the Council. In reality, it was the other way round. These Churches decided against participating, and it was only after they had

announced it that our Church took a decision not to attend the Council. But as I said, the Patriarch of Constantinople was convinced by someone that the Russian Orthodox Church had plotted against Constantinople, and what we see now is a revenge. I think they will reap what they sow.

– Patriarch Bartholomew, like you said earlier, is trying to divide the Russian Orthodox Church. Do you think it is coming out of vengeance or something like that?

– This is what I say, and this is what many people in the Orthodox Churches which I visited say. Even many of the Primates told me that Patriarch Bartholomew was deeply offended by the Russian Orthodox Church and that he believed that the Russian Orthodox Church had organized the plot. In fact, Patriarch Bartholomew himself told me about a year ago, when I visited him, that in his opinion it was the Russian Orthodox Church which instigated this non-participation of the other Churches in the Council of Crete. I was unable to convince him otherwise.

– It is like his eyes and ears are closed, right?

– Yes, and he turns a deaf ear to many voices and many warnings coming from the other Local Orthodox Churches. We know that several Churches openly voiced their disagreement with his actions, and in private conversations representatives of several Churches advised him against going along this path. Regrettably, he did not listen either to Patriarch Kirill who visited him personally on the 31st of August, or to the other Primates.

– It became evident with the recent events that the authority of the Patriarchate of Constantinople has been diminished, no matter what is happening. What repercussions will that diminished authority have for the rest of the Orthodox world?

– The division which existed in Ukraine now exists in the rest of the Orthodox world as well. We shall see how the Orthodox Churches will respond to the establishment of this new church organization. I very much hope that they will not recognize it. In the event that some of the Churches recognize this newly created organization, the division will be likely to deepen. We do hope that it will not happen and that the Orthodox Churches will stand in solidarity with each other, as they did before.

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