



Metropolitan Hilarion: Patriarch of Constantinople claims power over history itself

The chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate department for external church relations, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, has given an interview to the Serbian Politika daily.

- How will you comment the decision of the Ecumenical Patriarchate Synod decision of October 12? Who will now act as the coordinating center for Local Orthodox Churches, considering that, as you have said, the Ecumenical Patriarchate has lost this right due to its recent decisions? Who could, for instance, convene a Pan-Orthodox Council and chair it?

- The recent decisions of the Synod of the Patriarchate of Constantinople constitute a gross violation of canon law. Their aim is to legalize the schismatics and invade the canonical territory of the Moscow Patriarchate. The response the Holy Synod of our Church gave on October 15 only reflected the reality that has set in after Constantinople's actions. Having entered into communion with schismatics, it itself has departed into a schism. We had to resort to a break with the Church of Constantinople with deep sorrow, obeying to holy canons.

The Patriarch of Constantinople, who for centuries has occupied the place of the first among the equals, among the Primates of Local Orthodox Churches, now claims to become 'the first without the equals' – an arbiter who believes to have a right to interfere in the internal affairs of Local Orthodox Churches by unilaterally regulating the application of any canonical norm in them. He claims the power over history itself by revoking decisions made over three centuries ago. If this new concept of primacy in the Church is to be believed, none of church resolutions is now firm and unchangeable – at any moment it can be unilaterally canceled on the basis of political profit or other interests.

The danger of destruction of ages-old traditions has been more and more clearly realized now by Primates and hierarchs of Local Orthodox Churches, who speak out in favour of a pan-Orthodox discussion on the Ukrainian problem. In the new situation, which has shaped now, we have to search for new forms of communication of Churches adequate to it.

Can the Patriarch of Constantinople chair a Pan-Orthodox Council if the most important problems in the Orthodox world are linked with precisely his anti-canonical activity? I believe the negative answer to this question is obvious. The coordinating role that the Throne of Constantinople played, though not without difficulties, in the Orthodox world in the second part of the 20th century, cannot be played by it now. The Patriarchate of Constantinople has self-destructed as the coordinating center for Orthodox Churches.

- What is the current situation among the faithful and clergy in Ukraine? There were warnings that there was a danger of confiscation of the church property (this was stated in particular by the Synod of the Estonian Orthodox Church and the abbot of the Kiev Laura of the Caves who reported that during the festive celebrations it may end in violence), and you yourselves have warned on several occasions about a possible bloodshed?

- One can judge that these fears were not groundless by the number of people detained by the police near the Kiev Laura of the Caves and inside it on October 14. Some of the detainees proved to be armed. Apparently, they came there not to take part in the thanksgiving, which were celebrated in the monastery by the Primate of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, His Beatitude Onufry, Metropolitan of Kiev and All Ukraine.

At the same time, we can see what a multitude of people came to share in prayer with their Primate in Kiev; thousands of the faithful also assembled for the divine service in the Pochaev Laura, which extremists intended to seize too as they had declared. We are receiving information from various places that parishioners are ready to defend their churches.

Our whole Church is praying that the people of God in Ukraine with the help of the Lord Himself may hold out and preserve spiritual unity in these hard times.

- What do you think about the arguments put forth by the Ecumenical Patriarchate on the problem of granting autocephaly to Ukraine? Patriarch Bartholomew has recently stated that the Ecumenical Patriarchate has the exclusive right to grant autocephaly and that he has made steps in this direction because the Moscow Patriarchate has failed to settle 'the painful situation' in Ukraine.

- The historically established first place of the Patriarch of Constantinople in the diptych, which has been reserved for him after the break between Constantinople and Rome, is not the primacy of power but the primacy of honour that does not give him any special rights to the canonical territories of other Local Churches. As a reminder, as far back as 1993, a pan-Orthodox decision was reached that the declaration of autocephaly is possible only if all the Local Orthodox Churches approve it. One can state the obvious fact: the allegations about a temporary nature of the transfer of the Metropolis of Kiev to the Moscow Patriarchate are groundless since they proceed from the tendentious interpretation of an over three centuries-old document that has not been challenged by Constantinople for centuries. One can recall that for many years Patriarch Bartholomew testified not one or two times that he considered the late Metropolitan Vladimir and later Metropolitan Onufry to be the canonical head of Orthodoxy in Ukraine, not the heads of 'the Kiev Patriarchate' and the 'UAOC' whom he has now admitted to

communion. Repeatedly in the past, he called upon the schismatics to return to the Church through repentance. One can also mention that our Church has never given up the efforts to heal on canonical principles the schism in Ukraine inspired by the authorities. But let us focus on this question: Do the actions undertaken by Constantinople to achieve the declared goal lead to the healing of this wound? Obviously, they do not. On the contrary, they are aimed at a schism on the pan-Orthodox scale; they encourage the attempt to discriminate the canonical Church in Ukraine and provoke a religious conflict in the Ukrainian land.

Conciliarity in decision-making is, one can say, a measure that determines their validity. In this case, however, the Patriarchate of Constantinople declares his unilateral right to make decisions concerning other Churches. He no longer regards Local Churches as subjects of inter-church relations but simply confronts them with an accomplished fact. In his attempt to appropriate powers similar to those the Pope of Rome had in the Middle Ages, the Primate of Constantinople places himself outside the church order that distinguishes the Orthodox Church. Moreover, communion with schismatics who have not repented of their sin of schism places him himself outside the canonical space.

There is a paradoxical situation: the will of the faithful – who have remained faithful to the canonical Church in face of a schism that has been openly supported by the Ukrainian authorities – is ignored whereas those who persist in their schismatic actions are rewarded in the form of ‘recognition’ by the Patriarchate of Constantinople and a promise of autocephalous status for a new structure created with their participation.

At the same time, we can see that in spite of the promises given by the authorities not to drive anybody into this structure by force, they in the Supreme Rada await the consideration of bills that actually legalize the capture of churches and provide for the deprivation of the canonical Church of her historical name and other discriminatory measures. In addition, the leader of the schismatic ‘Kiev Patriarchate’ has openly stated that the old Orthodox shrines – the Kiev Laura of the Caves and the Laura of Our Lady of Pochaev – should be transferred to the new structure under preparation. Their designations have already been included in his full ‘patriarchal title’. Clearly, the mass attempts to appropriate churches and to hand great shrines over to the schismatics will provoke rejection among many believers. Already now, even contrary to the present-day legislative basis, church buildings are being captured with the support of extremists. What will happen if such ‘raids’ will occur everywhere?

- How far is ‘the Ukrainian autocephaly’ a church problem and how far is it a political one? I am asking that because the support for Ukrainian autocephaly has been expressed by quite a number of political instances beginning from Ukrainian President Petr Poroshenko to the American Department of State.

- There is no doubt that 'the creation of one autocephalous Ukrainian Church' is not an ecclesial but a political project. For this reason, the actions for its realization are undertaken precisely along the political line contrary to the opinion of the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church which represents a majority of the Orthodox believers in the country.

One cannot help pointing out that the main driving force in the realization of the 'autocephaly' project is the Ukrainian President Petr Poroshenko, who promotes it as part of the preparation for elections to take place next year. Besides, the idea of chipping off the Ukrainian Orthodox from the Russian Church has found a whole-hearted support in certain circles of the American establishment who believe Orthodoxy to be a challenge for the world order developing under their leadership.

Surely, it is not politicians' business to decide how the Church should be organized. Political circumstances may change, and the canonical order of the Church should not be dependent on the will or particular actions of political leaders. In European states, in the USA and other countries, the principle of separation of religious organizations from the state power is considered unshakable. Who has given Petr Poroshenko – who declares 'the European option for Ukraine' – the authority to negotiate the creation of a new 'church' structure contrary to the opinion of the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church?

The canonical Church in Ukraine has an over a millennium-long history that began from the Dnieper baptismal font under the Prince Vladimir Equal-to-the-Apostles. The secular power has no right to destroy this thousand year's continuity in an attempt to tear the Church in Ukraine away from the spiritual unity with the Moscow Patriarchate. I will also remind you that the Ukrainian Orthodox Church enjoys full independence in her internal affairs.

- The Ecumenical Patriarchate has declared that autocephaly will be granted in every place where it will be necessary. Can we then expect the emergence of new divisions in Orthodoxy in addition to the already existing ones in Ukraine and in the canonical territory of the Serbian Orthodox Church: in Macedonia, Montenegro and, may be, Croatia, if almost every state in the region receives its own church?

- The Synod of the Patriarchate of Constantinople by its decision has obliterated the ages-old rights and borders of Local Orthodox Churches.

Constantinople has proposed a new order whereby from now on an appeal of politicians and schismatics is sufficient for the ages-old agreements between Churches to be annulled and the schismatics to be admitted in communion and 'churches' they created to be granted 'autocephaly'. This approach is not limited to Ukraine, and now the danger is hanging over other Churches.

It is appropriate to remind you that, having admitted Denisenko and his followers, Constantinople has actually entered in communion with all those with whom 'the Kiev Patriarchate' shared communion. It is, in particular, the so-called 'Montenegro Orthodox Church' of the false metropolitan Michael Dedeic, together with whom Philaret himself celebrated and to whom he sent his 'hierarchs' for con-celebrations.

Therefore, if in Ukraine there will be a 'local church' made out of schismatics and if it is given autocephaly while the Local Orthodox Churches fail to give it proper response, then nothing will prevent Constantinople from realising the same scenario in other countries.

- What are the relations of the Moscow Patriarchate with the Serbian Orthodox Church?
When 'the Ukrainian problem' was developed, it could be heard from a part of the public that Moscow makes a great influence on the Serbian Orthodox Church, that the Patriarch of Serbia during his meeting with Patriarch Bartholomew will play the role of an emissary of the Russian Church. Such assessments were voiced in relation with a visit of the Pope to Serbia; it was stated that it would impossible due to the opposition of the Moscow Patriarchate.

- Influence is a political category, and it does not fit for describing relations between the Russian and Serbian Orthodox Churches, which are tied by age-old bonds of fraternal love. Even the founder of the Serbian Church, St. Sava, was tonsured by the Russian monastery on Mount Athos, and quite a number of historical sites in Belgrade were built by Russian emigres for whom Yugoslavia was the second homeland. We are united by many things; our Churches have a common history, a similar historical experience; we look similarly at many things. Naturally, in this situation we maintain close fraternal contacts seeking to help each other. It is a testimony to a common faith not subject to any political state of affairs of this age; we cherish it and will hand it over to the next generations.

At the same time, it is my conviction that when the Serbian Orthodox Church and her Primate make a fair assessment of the present development in Ukraine, they base themselves not on a desire to do something pleasant for the Russians but out of the desire to defend the canonical truth of Orthodoxy any deviation from which is pernicious for all Churches.