Metropolitan Hilarion: The fact that the Patriarchate of Constantinople has recognized a schismatic structure means for us that it itself is now in schism

On October 17, 2018, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, head of the Moscow Patriarchate department for external church relations gave an interview to the BBC Russian Service on the situation that has developed in connection with the anti-canonical actions of the Patriarchate of Constantinople and the decision of the Russian Orthodox Church to break off the Eucharistic communion with it.

- **On October 16, the session of the Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church lasted for about eight hours. Why so long? What did the Synod discuss?**

- It needs to be clarified that the session of the Synod began with some delay, which was caused by the preceding meeting of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill with President of Belarus A.G. Lukashenko. Usually, such meetings last for about an hour but yesterday the talk lasted two hours. Accordingly, the whole schedule shifted.

However, the sessions of the Holy Synod, as a rule, last seven or eight hours because many issues tend to accumulate in the period between sessions. It is the election of a new hierarch and opening of monasteries, and various personnel matters. But we certainly devoted a considerable part of the time to the topic of relationships with the Patriarchate of Constantinople. It took about two or three hours to edit the texts of the Statement of the Holy Synod, which was issued on October 16.

- That is to say, you had a draft of this statement?

- There was a draft.

- **So, before the beginning of the session of the Synod it was already known that a breakoff is inevitable?**

- It is impossible to guess beforehand how the discussion at the Synod would go. A draft text was prepared beforehand, in which canonical arguments had been collected and set forth as their meaning remains unchangeable regardless of whatever final decision on the rupture of the Eucharistic communion with the Patriarchate of Constantinople may become.

It can be compared with an investigative case and the verdict in a legal process: in a case, which has been prepared for a long time, arguments and evidence are collected but it is the court that pronounces the sentence taking into account the collected materials. The tasks of the Department for External Church Relation, which I head, includes the preparation of documents for the Synod on external ecclesial topics, but it is the Synod that makes a decision collectively.

- That is to say, there were more arguments for a rupture?

- Unfortunately, we had no arguments against a breakoff of relations at all: Constantinople made such decisions that we simply could not give any other response to them.

- In comments made before the session of the Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church, an opinion was voiced that the process of rupture of relation will be rather long. However, the decisions made yesterday cut off everything right away. How did it turn out?

- On the Patriarchate of Constantinople's side, the process has moved on quicker than it could be surmised. I think Constantinople has some reason to hurry. Perhaps, the main reason is that they wish to have time to carry out their designs till President Poroshenko is still in power because they realize that if another president comes there will be no conditions so excellent as those created for them by the present head of the Ukrainian state.

- A rupture of relations, it is the highest measure of church sanctions. If Ukraine is still given Tomos what else can the Russian Church do in response?

- I do not want to guess the developments beforehand; however, it can be noted that the arsenal of the means of impact is large enough. After all, even in international relations a rupture of diplomatic relations between states is not yet the end of story if the conflict continues developing.

I would like to hope very much that today's conflict will be stopped. If it does not happen and a long period of confrontation comes, possibly, various ways of impact of one Church on another will be used.

- **For instance?**

- I do not wish to voice possible ways since we should have an especially responsible approach to decisions on this topic. If Constantinople makes further steps, our Synod will assemble again and we will make further decisions.

As of today, we have very clearly stated: the fact that the Patriarchate of Constantinople has recognized

a schismatic structure means for us that Constantinople itself is now in schism. It has identified itself with a schism. Accordingly, we cannot have the full Eucharistic communion with it.

- If the Tomos is granted and other Local Churches recognize this new church structure, will the Russian Church break off communion with them as well?

- It do not want now to try to guess beforehand the further development of the situation. If there are some new events, they will become a subject for discussion by the Synod. However, I have not seen so far any support of Constantinople from any Local Church. There are Churches that keep silent; there are Churches that openly speak against but not a single Church has so far come out in support of the predatory actions of the Patriarchate of Constantinople.

- In Russia, the Church is separated from the state. At the same time, first the MFA head S. V. Lavrov spoke against the action of Constantinople, then President V. V. Putin did it, during the Security Council meeting at that. It was followed by a decision of the Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church on the breakoff of relations with the Patriarchate of Constantinople. Are these events connected? Did you ask the authorities for help?

- The present conflict is developing in two planes. There is a political plane and an ecclesial one. On the political plane, there is a conflict between Ukraine and Russia. The Ukrainian President Poroshenko believes he has a right to not only speak out on church issues but also to make decisions linked with the organization of church life in Ukraine. On his part, the Russian president and the structures within his jurisdiction believe they have a right to speak out on these issues.

But it is a political component while the task of the Holy Synod of our Church is to respond to the actions of Constantinople on the strictly canonical plane. We do not touch upon political issues.

We do not at all challenge the sovereignty of Ukraine. But state sovereignty has nothing to do with how a Church is ordered. As a reminder, some Local Orthodox Churches located within the borders of one country while others are multinational. For instance, the Patriarchate of Alexandria unites 54 countries in the African continents; the Patriarchate of Antioch unites Syria and Lebanon; the Patriarchate of Jerusalem – Israel, Palestine, Jordan; the Serbian Patriarchate – Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro and other republics of former Yugoslavia. If all these Churches are divided by the number of countries of which they are part, then we will have not fifteen Local Churches but as many as there are countries in the UN.

- Speaking about the already mentioned meeting of the Russian Security Council, the presidential press-secretary Dmitry Peskov said that it was devoted to the problems of the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine. At the same time, they in the Russian Church say that

the Ukrainian Church is autonomous and independent.

- I think, in this case there was an inaccuracy. There is no such thing as 'the Russian Orthodox Church' in Ukraine. There is the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which is a self-governed part of the Moscow Patriarchate. Now some Ukrainian politicians try to rename her as 'the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine'.

- **After the decision made by the Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church, a hot discussion began on such a question as prospects for pilgrimage to Holy Mountain Athos. There are different opinions. Some say that it is not recommended to anybody to pray on Mount Athos, others say it is permissible to pray on Athos but not for the clergy and the clergy will be punished for that. So, who can go to Athos; will any sanctions follow with regard to the clergy?**

- Anyone can go to the Holy Mountain who has a Greek visa and permission to enter Athos. We can pray to God in any place on the Earth.

There is such notion as the Eucharistic communion. It is an opportunity for a believer of one Church to take communion and to make confession in churches of another Church. We have broken off the Eucharistic communion with the Patriarchate of Constantinople, which exercises jurisdiction over Athos. For us, the rupture of communion means that we cannot celebrate divine offices in Athonite monasteries, nor can we take communion in them; however, we have an opportunity to visit these monasteries as believers and as tourists. That is, there is no rupture in human relations whatsoever.

- And can the clergy visit monasteries on Athos?

- The clergy of the Russian Orthodox Church can visit them.

- They will not be punished if they come to the Holy Mountain, will they?

- If a priest takes part in divine services at Athonite monasteries, then this matter will become a subject for discussion with his ruling bishop. There are various forms of canonical suspensions in such cases.

- For instance?

- One of the existing means is suspension in ministry.

- And this straight away after only one trip?

- This is up to the bishop. There are various means. It may be a reprimand.

- Russian benefactors and patrons have donated over 200 million dollars. These are private donations. Do you know about it?

- Yes.

- Then what is to be done by those who have invested funds in the adornment of Athonite monasteries? And another question: Is some response expected from Athonite starets to the recent events; is it possible that they will protest against Constantinople's decisions?

- We have warmest and most respectful feelings for Athos. We do not want to prompt to Athonite starets what to do.

History shows that when Athos is concerned over something, the monasteries on the Holy Mountain do find ways to inform the Patriarch of Constantinople about it. For instance, when Patriarch Athenagoras of Constantinople met with the Pope of Rome, Athonite monasteries expressed their protest against it; some even stopped to mention the name of the Patriarch of Constantinople during the liturgy. But, I repeat, it is an internal affair of Athos.

As for the Russian businessmen who donate to Athos, I would advise them to switch their attention to the monasteries of our Church and invest in their restoration and adornment. We have our own saints, our own Athos – the Solovki and Valamo Monasteries, the St. Sergius Monastery of the Trinity; in Ukraine, there is the Kiev Monastery of the Caves. If there is a wish to donate one's funds to a God-pleasing cause, then we have no less but perhaps even more holy places than the Holy Mountain has.

- What will happen to the Russian monks on Athos? For instance, in the St. Panteleimon Monastery which is considered Russian from of old? As is known, the president of Russia is received in it according to a special protocol. Where are the monks to run to now?

- They do not have to run anywhere but should continue their existence and their work there. I do not think that anything will change in the monastery status.

- But in the St. Panteleimon monastery, the name of the Ecumenical Patriarch is mentioned during the liturgy. At the same time, the monastery lives at the expense of Russian donators; it is visited by eminent pilgrims beginning from Igor Sechin to Irog Shuvalov. Where to will

they travel now?

- I think it is also an internal affair of the monastery. They have a council of starets and I think they, in this situation, will make an appropriate decision. I would not like to prompt them, especially through the mass media, nor to predict their decisions. I think they themselves will understand how it will be done better.

- In summer in Greece two Russian diplomats were expelled; now the situation has aggravated in Ukraine. Can it be said that these are semi-religious, semi-political hotbeds of conflict between the Russian Church and Constantinople. Do you consider a possibility for the emergence of some more problems in the world Orthodoxy because of this confrontation?

- As for the situation as it is developing in the world Orthodoxy as a result of the actions of Constantinople, in my opinion, an essential problem is what yesterday I described as the process of self-liquidation of the Patriarchate of Constantinople as the coordinating center for the Orthodox Church.

Patriarch Bartholomew has opted for a schism. For a long time, the Patriarchate of Constantinople has positioned itself as the coordinator of inter-Orthodox activities of various kinds. And we are ready to join this activity. For instance, for over fifty years we have participated together with other Local Orthodox Churches in the preparations of a pan-Orthodox Council, which ultimately has never taken place. That is to say, what did take place was a Council but not pan-Orthodox.

But even after the Council of Crete, which did not become pan-Orthodox, the cooperation between Churches continued. Thus, in the very end of August, Patriarch Kirill came to Patriarch Bartholomew. There was a long talk, quite fraternal in its tone, but regrettably, it produced no results because the sides remained ‘with their own interests’.

- **The Greek mass media posted a shorthand report of the meeting between Patriarch Kirill and Patriarch Bartholomew. Is this transcript reliable?**

- I did not compare the shorthand report published by newspapers with what has survived in my memory of that talk. There was one person, a staff member of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, who took it down in shorthand. The initial arrangement was that the content of the talk was strictly confidential. When Patriarch Kirill talked to the press at the airport, he said absolutely nothing about the content of the talk.

Then the Patriarchate of Constantinople decided to organize what is described now by not a very nice

word ‘leak’. I would not comment on the quality of this leakage and the degree to which it corresponds to the reality of what the staffer of the Patriarchate of Constantinople wrote down. But I can point out: the negotiations held in August produced no results and the Patriarchate of Constantinople took a line of further escalation of the conflict.

- And why the Synod did not call yesterday for convening a conference of the Primates of all the Churches? Indeed, there were such proposals.

- Such proposals were made at the previous session of the Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church. Traditionally, synaxises of the Primates are convened by the Patriarch of Constantinople. But he did not listen to the voices of Local Churches and did not express willingness to convene such a conference.

He is now acting proceeding from the paradigm whereby the Patriarch of Constantinople is the sole ‘owner’ of the Orthodox Church; he decides and all obey.

But there have never been such a thing in the Orthodox Church. Now Constantinople has invented a new theory and acted according to the above-mentioned paradigm, but we do not agree and will never agree with it. Perhaps, the Patriarch of Constantinople wanted to feel like ‘the Pope of Rome’ for the Orthodox East. But the Pope of Rome has long stopped using the methods used by the Patriarch of Constantinople engaged in predation and plunder in the canonical territories of other Local Churches.

Having opted for a schism, the Patriarch of Constantinople has consciously rejected the right to be named the coordinating center for the Orthodox Churches. We no longer have such a coordinating center, and we either will create some other center or live without a coordinating center just as we did up to the early 22th century.

- Can the Russian Orthodox Church now become the first among the equals?

- We do not claim any place above that which we occupy now in the diptych of Orthodox Churches. We have a real Church and real flock. How our further relations with Constantinople and other Churches will be built will depend on the totality of factors But we will certainly not respond to every challenge thrown down to us.

- **Judging from what we saw in the transcript of the talk of Patriarchs Bartholomew and Kirill, two discourses have clashed – a conditionally liberal one on the part of Constantinople and a conditionally conservative one on the part of the Russian Orthodox Church. Does not it seem to you that with time there may emerge two families of Orthodox Churches? Roughly speaking, the Greek one will stand for one thing and the Russian one will stand for another?**

- I would not exclude it, though I do not want to make any forecasts and very much hope that the unity of our Orthodox Church will survive. The question is how it will be arranged structurally. But we have no answer to this question now.

We remember there was a country – the Soviet Union. This country had a president. At some moment, this president self-destructed and announced that the country disintegrated and he was no longer the president. Something similar has happened now. We had the first among the equals – the Patriarch of Constantinople, to whom we came, with whom we consulted and coordinated various common Orthodox matters. Now he has self-destructed as the coordinating canter.

How will we live further on? I think we will survive even without such a center. It is not the first case in history – something similar happened in the mid-15th century when the Patriarch of Constantinople entered into union with Rome while other Patriarchs did not recognize it, and we lived for some time without a canonical Patriarch of Constantinople at all. Since that moment the autocephalous Russian Church has begun her life.

There was a moment in 1996 when Constantinople invaded Estonia, and we broke off relations. And now, such a moment has come as well. Therefore, as Ecclesiastes said, 'There is no new thing under the sun'.

- **On Russian TV channels, Patriarch Bartholomew almost straight out called a US puppet. But I want to know what exactly is the role played by the USA in this story.**

- I think that the USA plays some role if American president's advisers come to Ukraine and openly state support for autocephaly.

Very soon, however, the Patriarch of Constantinople will have to encounter the problem of autocephaly of the American Church. Many believers in the USA, including hierarchs in the structure within the Patriarch Bartholomew's jurisdiction, realize that the relation between the American Church and the Patriarch of Constantinople is rather conditional, and they wonder why there may be autocephaly in independent Ukraine and cannot be in the no less independent country – the United States.

But it will be already another stage in the development of the conflict initiated by the Patriarch of Constantinople, which has led to his withdrawal from the Orthodox unity.

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