



Three hierarchs of Bulgarian Orthodox Church make statement on situation in Ukraine

Metropolitans Gabriel of Lovech, John of Varna and Veliki Preslavl and Daniel of Vidin stated their considerations about the alarming situation in which the Orthodox Church in Ukraine has found herself. They have made the following statement, which was published on October 9, 2018, on the official site of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church:

At its session on October 4, 2018, the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church – Bulgarian Patriarchate (BOC-BP) considered Letter No. 599 of October 3, 2018, from Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia concerning the alarming situation in which the Orthodox Church in Ukraine has found herself and the actions of the Patriarchate of Constantinople in the canonical territory of the Russian Orthodox Church – Moscow Patriarchate in the above-mentioned country.

After the letter was read out, various opinions were expressed in the course of a discussion. Each of the much-esteemed fellow-hierarchs, who wished to share his opinion on the issue under consideration, had an opportunity to do it.

Motivated by our hierarchal conscience we express the following considerations:

First, an impression is created that there is a discrepancy between the motives stated by the Patriarchate of Constantinople concerning its unilateral interference in the affairs of another Local Church and the developments actually taking place because of this interference. It is stated that in progress there is a search for ways for overcoming the divisions existing among the Orthodox people in Ukraine. At the present stage however, the Orthodox who confess their spiritual unity with the Ukrainian Church of the Moscow Patriarchate are experiencing violence and are victimized. The question arises: What will happen to these people if, because of Constantinople's stated intentions for Ukraine, another canonical Orthodox structure will be created along with the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate?

Have we forgotten about the consequences of the state authority's interference in the affairs of the BOC-BP during the sad division of 1992-2004 and how quite a number of churches, monasteries, production enterprises and finances of our Orthodox Church were captured by the schismatics with the help of the political power of that time? Who will take the responsibility for all these people in Ukraine; whose life will be threatened when they will rise in defence of their holy places – churches and monasteries, when the registration will be taken away from the present canonical Orthodox Church to which they belong – an

action that Ukrainian politicians openly talk about?

Let us remind ourselves of the words of the late Metropolitan Nathanael of Newrokop who said at the 1998 enlarged supra-jurisdictional Pan-Orthodox Council, 'I ask myself: Whose cleric am I? A political authority or a Church? I often say that I have become a cleric to listen to a robe, not trousers. We, clergy, do not interfere in politics and do not want politicians' interference in church affairs'. (from the Actions of the 1998 Council in Sofia).

Secondly, we are especially concerned about a deep discrepancy between the Patriarchate of Constantinople' justification of its actions and the canon law order which has existed in the Orthodox Church for millennia. References are made to over 300-year-old documents on the Patriarchate of Constantinople's granting or not granting a right to jurisdiction to the Moscow Patriarchate, and the Moscow Patriarchate is accused of seizing the right to jurisdiction over the Metropolis of Kiev. However, 300 years later a statement is made about the violation of these rights after the appropriate documents had been issued. It is not today that such disputes developed over a territory and a particular bishop's right to jurisdiction over it. It is especially important to recall Canon 133 of the 419 Council of Carthage, which established a three-year term in which it is admissible to consider claims to a territory belonging to this bishop's jurisdiction. Canon 17 of the Forth Ecumenical Council and similar Canon 25 of the Forth Ecumenical Council (of Trullo) defined the 30 year's statute of limitation for disputes over the belonging of a parish to the diocese of this canonically ruling bishop.

In the case under consideration here, however, the limitation exceeds 300 years. Is it necessary to recall that for over a thousand years the relations between the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and the Patriarchate of Constantinople and other autocephalous Churches founded in the Balkans later the boundaries of a particular Local Church have been changed on many occasions in accord with historical vicissitudes and changes in the frontiers of the state in which a given Church was located. Does it mean that it is admissible to review the jurisdiction of the territory of, say, the diocese of Mecembria, which shone forth in antiquity, in order to establish to which Local Church in the Balkans it belongs? As was indicated in the recent letter of His Holiness Irenaeus, Patriarch of Serbia, to the Ecumenical Patriarch, 'in the holy canonical tradition and practice of the Church, there are, along with others, a criterion of antiquity and 'ancient traditions (Canon 8 of the Third Ecumenical Council) and universally accepted relations, which such an outstanding canonist as you are, know better than our humbleness does' (the letter of August 13, 2018). That is, the statutes adopted by all the Churches through centuries cannot be cancelled or challenged by one Local Church (in this case, that of Constantinople), whatever her motives might be. Accepting the claims of the Patriarchate of Constantinople means a literary dissection of the unity of the Orthodox Church.

We believe that in this case it is appropriate to evoke some statements made by Patriarch Bartholomew

on the same issue quite recently. In his letter of July 11, 1995, Patriarch Bartholomew writes the following to Patriarch Alexy II of Moscow and All Russia, 'In this connection, we would like to assure you that the inclusion of Ukrainian communities [from the diaspora, that is, outside Russia and Ukraine] in the canonical order of the Orthodox Church through taking them under the omophoros of the Ecumenical Patriarchate will ultimately prove to be beneficial, assuredly for the relations of the most holy Russian Church with the faithful in Ukraine as well. Because, on one hand, those admitted will be obliged to state officially that they will not seek autocephaly for the Ukrainian Church or her part through the well-known methods of 'autocephalists' who use all possible means, while on the other hand, because they will not be able cooperate or enter into communion with others without damage to themselves since for them the canonical principle will be valid: 'those who communicate with those placed outside communion will themselves become outside communion'. The Patriarchate of Constantinople has adhered to this position strictly and consistently till recently.

One can give still more arguments on this issue but, in our opinion, the above speaks clearly enough of a danger to the unity of the Orthodox Church, which comes from the unilateral action of the Patriarchate of Constantinople in Ukraine. Whether it has reasons for acting in this way or not, whether the Moscow Patriarchate, in its turn, has reasons for defending its rights – it is, judging from the tendency of the developments, obviously a question that cannot be solved by the two Patriarchates. But having encountered an actual rupture of the Eucharistic communion between two Local Churches, which, if the dispute deepens, could turn the present local schism from Ukraine into a large-scale schism of the holy Orthodoxy, we cannot agree that a continuation of unilateral actions of the Patriarchate of Constantinople in Ukraine is a way of settling a church division there. 'Comparing a schism with a heresy, St. John Chrysostom says that a rupture of the unity and fullness of the Church is an evil no less than the creation of a heresy. And as much as a schism in this form deserves condemnation so it also deserves even greater condemnation for its consequences because ultimately any schism turns into heresy' (Bishop Nikodim Milas).

Therefore, the Patriarchate of Constantinople has no right to enter into somebody else's canonical territory and into communion with the schismatics in Ukraine. Accepting this invasion or tolerating it would lead to a dangerous precedent with unpredictable consequences and a threat to the unity of the Church. If an illegitimate invasion in somebody else's canonical territory is accepted today, what can guarantee to us that tomorrow the same will not happen to us, i.e., to the canonical territory of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church? Claims to exercise trans-border jurisdiction by one Local Church in a diocese of another Local Church cannot be justified by any means!

On the basis of the above and for quite a number of reasons, including the experience of a division in the Bulgarian Orthodox Church which lived through it and the resolution of this painful problem through a holy enlarged trans-jurisdictional Pan-Orthodox Council convened in 1998 in Sofia, we express the

conviction that an authoritative solution of the church dispute in Ukraine in this situation is possible only through a pan-Orthodox discussion and convocation of a Pan-Orthodox Council. A few days ago, the Patriarchate of Antioch proposed to convene a meeting of the Primate of Local Churches.

At this Pan-Orthodox Council, we should, in the first place, adhere to the canons and the unity of Orthodoxy because, as the late Metropolitan Nathanael said addressing the Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople at the 1998 Council, 'we have gathered together in order to heal a schism but this Pan-Orthodox Council should by no means result in a new schism' (From the 1998 Council in Sofia).

We believe it useful to quote the response given by highly esteemed His All-Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople: 'We thank Metropolitan of Newrokop... As for some places in his speech, we do not believe that the holy brother assumes that we wish to cooperate with the state at the detriment of the canonical Church of the country. Also with regard to the scismatics' allegations that we would back down and that each Church allegedly recognizes them as such as they present themselves, we state that the schism, which will be formed after October 20, is ridiculous and no one will have to recognize the false church. The Skopje [Macedonian] church has been struggling for years to be accepted, to be recognized by other Churches, but since it was formed and ordered in certain conditions, no one to this day recognizes it and we do not believe will recognize in the future. No one can put pressure on a particular Orthodox Church in this direction'.

For us it is strange that in such a conflict situation there is no search for opportunities for dialogue. Here it is possible to use the example of the BOC-BP's refusal to attend the Council on Crete in 2016. At that time, the Holy Synod thoroughly explained that the preparation of the Council was inadequate and that there was a number of issues on which no agreement had been reached and that there was a risk of pressure to be exerted in making certain decisions. The consequent decisions allowing second marriage for priests (that is, marriage after the ordination) actually show that the Holy Synod did have grounds for fears. Entering into marriage after ordination is categorically prohibited by an Apostolic Canon and a decision of an Ecumenical Council. There was a pan-Orthodox consensus on this issue, reflected in draft decisions of the Pan-Orthodox Council under preparation. During the Council in Crete, the text of the document, precisely in this part, was changed and became obscure, which opens the door for different interpretations. The resolution of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, which followed soon after, re-confirmed the validity of the Holy Synod's fears. In this sense, a refusal to attend that Council does not mean a failure to observe the synodality of the Orthodox Church, but rather a violation of synodality takes place when church canons are ignored.

With prayer we express our hope for the beginning of a pan-Orthodox discussion on the situation and convocation of a Pan-Orthodox Council for solving the church problem in Ukraine.

We pray to God that He may safeguard His Church from further discords.

+ Gabriel, Metropolitan of Lovech

+ John, Metropolitan of Varna and Veliki Preslav

+ Daniel, Metropolitan of Vidin

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