Metropolitan Hilarion: Isolation need not to be feared

The Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR) declared on September 25 that it suspends con-celebration with hierarchs of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, and the Holy Synod of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate demanded that Constantinople exarchs should leave Kiev. The issue of the autocephaly of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church is a pre-election political project, and the actions of Constantinople in Ukraine are anti-canonical, believes Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, head of the Moscow Patriarchate department for external church relations. In an interview to Izvestia daily, the hierarch also explains why the developments will not heal the schism but rather legalize it and why the ROC is not afraid of finding herself in isolation among the Local Churches and why the Russian Church calls for a pan-Orthodox discussion of the problem.

- In the history of Orthodoxy, there were many cases when autocephaly or autonomy was granted to churches in independent states. Were such decisions made under political pressure? According to what criteria does a Church make such a decision? Is the UOC in need of autocephaly now?

- A Church determines an optimal form of ordering church life in a particular territory proceeding from the internal church expediency. The gaining of state independence is not at all the decisive factor.

For instance, after Czechoslovakia broke up into two independent states, the Orthodox Church in these countries has remained united. The same is true for the Serbian Church which has preserved its unity in the territory of former Yugoslavia.

A change in the political structure does not give cause for establishing an autocephalous church in each single country. Otherwise, there would be 54 autocephalous churches in place of one Patriarchate of Alexandria.

Local authorities and major political forces are often interested in having a church structure isolated to the maximum from any external influence in their territory, a sort of ‘pocket church’. Indeed, for secular politicians, a Church is a part of the electorate, a lever for influencing society. Church people, however, separate church expediency from political interests and do not yield to catchy political slogans. The slogan ‘An independent church to each independent state’, which is often voiced today, is a purely political manifest not at all in the Orthodox milieu but in Catholic Italy, which has nothing to do with the norms of ordering church life.

The issue of autocephaly in Ukraine today is a political pre-election project that has nothing to do with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Read its statute: the Ukrainian Orthodox Church is independent as it is; it has more rights than a church autonomy provides for. It is a self-governed Local Church with its own Synod and councils, with an independent administrative structure. It is fully independent in its internal governance, personnel decisions and strategy of its development. There is no need for her to take part in dubious political projects, and its supreme church authority straightforwardly say so. The more so that they are developed under such pressure from the state and with the participation of uncanonical, that is, not recognized in the Orthodox world, groups who undermine the church unity in Ukraine.

- You have stated that in the case that autocephaly is given to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, a bloodshed can begin in Ukraine, as the schismatics will take control of major monasteries, such as the Kiev Laura of the Caves, while the Orthodox faithful will defend these holy places. What are the attitudes among the parishioners of the UOC of Moscow Patriarchate?

- The declared goal of the project is to unite Ukraine Orthodoxy which has been suffering from the schism for 20 years. But the canonical norms for restoring the unity of a Church through the repentance of those who committed it are ignored. The position of the Ukrainian Orthodox church is not taken into consideration. It means there will be attempts to effect the unification through political means by creating an artificial structure and seeking to incorporate in it the communities of the canonical Church with the help of administrative and pubic pressure.

The Ukrainian authorities have promised an equal co-existence of all the confessions in the country, but it is just words. The recent years have shown that Ukrainian politicians have embarked on the path of discrimination against the canonical Church. Over 50 churches have been captured in Ukraine already now, and court rulings that they should be returned to lawful owners are not implemented. Politicians and mass media daily stir up hate toward the so-called ‘Moscow parsons’ – the clergy of the canonical Ukrainian Church. In the Supreme Rada, a set of legislative initiatives has been drafted with the aim to legalize a mechanism for further captures of churches of our Church, to incapacitate it and even to deprive it of its name. The leaders of the schism have openly demanded that the Kiev Laura of the Caves and Pochaev Laura, which is in use by the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church, should be handed over to them. The president of Ukraine stated before the Supreme Rada deputies that the Ukrainian Orthodox Church would be forcibly renamed as Russian Orthodox Church.

The feedback of social polls made to order can handle well. However, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church with its more than 12 thousand real not fictitious communities is the largest confession in Ukraine. It would be naïve to believe that millions of parishioners throughout the country will stand and see how armed militants take away their monasteries and churches under the protection of the police explaining

it as a ‘volunteer transition’. Even the captures of small village parishes in Ukraine were accompanied with violence. The mass capture of numerous urban parishes or an attempt to take away such all-Ukrainian shrines as lauras will inevitably lead to an upsurge of violence and possibly to a large-scale inter-confessional conflict all across the country. Such fears are confirmed already now by the UOC bishops and priests: the faithful at the local level are highly motivated.

- I think any Local Church will hardly remain aloof from the UOC incident. In the hierarchy of the Orthodox Churches the Church of Constantinople occupies the first place in honour. Is there a danger that the Russian Orthodox Church with its categorical attitude to Constantinople with time will find itself in isolation?

- Since the 11th century, after Rome’s falling away, the Patriarch of Constantinople has occupied the first place in the diptychs of the Orthodox Church, that is, in the order of liturgical commemoration of the Primates of the Local Churches. This primacy has been always understood as primacy of honour, not power, and the Patriarch of Constantinople himself as the first among the equals – the Primates of the autocephalous Churches. It was as late as the 20th century that Patriarchs of Constantinople began claiming their special powers in the Orthodox Church but these claims are lacking theological and canonical grounds.

What is happening in Ukraine now is not just a territorial dispute between two Churches, as it may seem to some. It is something bigger. It is Constantinople’s conscious and open imposition of its power, actually, papist claims. We can see that the Patriarch of Constantinople no longer sees other Local Churches as subjects of inter-church relations. From his point of view, all the decisions shall be made in only one place – at Phanar. Constantinople has no intention to negotiate the issue of Ukrainian autocephaly with the Russian Church alone but with other Churches either. Even the delegation, which was empowered by Phanar to negotiate the Ukrainian issue with Local Churches, visited the Primates not to ask for their opinions about Constantinople’s intentions but to inform them about the decision already made. This has been stated on several occasions by representatives of the Patriarchate of Constantinople.

The Russian Church does not need to fear isolation. If Constantinople continues its anti-canonical actions, it will place itself outside the canonical space, outside the understanding of church order that distinguishes the Orthodox Church.

- Which Churches have already expressed a firm and unequivocal support for the stand taken by the Russian Orthodox Church? Will they make official statements on this issue? Is there a possibility that they may change their opinion?

- Recently I have had talks with many Primates of Orthodox Churches and can testify that in the Orthodox world there is a shared understanding that it is possible to overcome the schism in Ukraine only on canonical principles. The intention of the Patriarchate of Constantinople to create an autocephalous Church through merging the schismatics in a single structure without repentance of this sin of schism and by completely ignoring the already existing canonical Church in Ukraine is incompatible with canons. It is not a way of healing but legalizing a schism. The Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church has appealed to the Local Churches to initiate a pan-Orthodox consideration of the church situation in Ukraine. I hope that the Local Churches will respond to this appeal since everybody are aware of our common responsibility for the unity of the Orthodox Church, which can be irretrievably damaged if the process of granting autocephaly to the schismatics is carried by the Patriarchate of Constantinople to its conclusion.

- How will the Russian Orthodox Church build its relations with the Churches which will take Constantinople's side?

- I believe all the Local Churches realize that the legalization of the schism, if effected, will not make it canonical and they will not enter in communion with the structure made up of schismatics.

- The financial side of the Moscow Patriarchate's loss of Ukrainian dioceses, has it been evaluated?

- In general, it is wrong to link problems of church unity with any financial calculations.

Besides, it should be pointed out that the Ukrainian Orthodox Church enjoys in the Moscow Patriarchate the rights of broad self-governance including full independence in financial and economic matters. For many decades now, no funds have been transferred from Ukraine to the common church budget.

Therefore, our unity by no means is linked with money, and it would be strange to believe that this matter would be of interest to us now too.

- Does the Russian Orthodox Church receive support from other confessions?

- As for other religious confessions in Ukraine, it can be stated that there is an explicit support from them to the canonical Church. The Vatican does not maintain any relations with the Ukrainian schismatics. Representatives of the Roman Catholic Church has repeatedly condemned in public the oppression of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, in particular discriminatory Bills Nos 4128 and 4511 under consideration in the Supreme Rada since these provide for the deprivation of the canonical Church in Ukraine of its rights and legalization of mechanisms for capturing its churches.

Pope Francis of Rome has written to His Holiness Patriarch Kirill about his concern for the development of the discriminatory bills, and in their joint declaration after their Havana meeting in 2016, they stressed that 'Orthodox and Greek Catholics are in need of reconciliation and of mutually acceptable forms of co–existence'.

During the meeting with a delegation of the Moscow Patriarchate in May 2018, Pope Francis very clearly formulated the position of the Holy See on Ukraine, stating, 'the Catholic Church will never allow an attitude of division to be born on its own. We will never allow it… the Catholic Churches, should not interfere in internal affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church, not even in political matters'.

The apostolic nunciature in Ukraine reported about the meetings of high-ranking representatives of the Holy See Secretariat of State with the Ukrainian ambassador to express concern; this topic was also dealt with during the visit made to Ukraine by the Vatican Secretary of State Pietro Parolin.

The high-ranking representatives of the diocese of Kharkov and Zaporozhe, Bishops Stanislav Shikoradyuk and Yan Sobilo, assessed Bill 4128 aimed against the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church as provocative and capable of bringing about a religious war in Ukraine. According to their unambiguous assessment, this bill is an act of raid and 'creation of a corruptive scheme to make parishes move freely to the Kiev Patriarchate', and actually 'a return to the last century 30s'.

Concern for the situation has been also expressed by Archbishop Justin Welby of Canterbury. He said that 'we are deeply saddened by these complications… and their potential impact on the whole Orthodox world… We lift up prayers for their peaceful solution'.

The General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, the Rev. Olav Tveit, in his letter to Peter Poroshenko and Andrey Porubiy expressed protest against the bills seeing in them a violation of freedom of faith in Ukraine.

The secretary of the Ukrainian Lutheran Church Ihor Rudzik described the bills as interference in the internal church affairs. Similarly, Eugene Ziskind, executive director of the Association of Jewish Religious Organizations in Ukraine, stated that Bill No. 4128 'opens a way to raid activity, capture of church buildings and lands'.

- In your opinion, what is the most optimistic and the least optimistic scenarios of further developments?

- I would not like now to present myself as a futurologist. The Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox

Church, in its recent statement, clearly outlines its position pointing to the consequences to which any further invasion of the Patriarch of Constantinople to Ukraine will lead and which I have already stated above. I believe that a pan-Orthodox discussion on the church situation in Ukraine can prevent a tragic division of Orthodoxy.

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