Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk: Legitimization of the schism in Ukraine will cut up the whole body of world Orthodoxy

For already two months a lively discussion has not been subsiding around the prospects for creating in Ukraine the so-called 'One Local Church' – a project initiated by the president of that country, Petr Poroshenko, who has been strongly supported by nationalist politicians and schismatics. Various aspects of the developments are commented by Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, head of the Moscow Patriarchate department for external church relations, in his interview with the Interfax-Religion web portal.

- Ukrainian autocephaly is still one of the most discussed issues. On June 1, the Synod of the Church of Constantinople completed its regular session. It was expected to consider the granting of autocephaly to Ukraine. Nevertheless, no decisions on this issue have been published. How would you explain that?

- The status of autocephaly implies the independence of a Church in its self-governance. According to the commonly accepted norms of canon law, it is granting to an already existing canonical Church, not to a country or a state. In Ukraine there is only one local Church recognized by world Orthodoxy, which is the Ukrainian Orthodox Church headed by Metropolitan Onufry of Kiev and All Ukraine. It has not asked anybody for autocephaly since it is independent in its governance as it is.

The support of the canonical episcopate by the church people is evident from the photos of annual processions with the cross on the Baptism of Russia Day, as dozens, hundreds of thousands of people led by their bishops take to the streets. And this after four years of extremely aggressive information campaign held in Ukraine against the canonical Church.

It is very strange that the destiny of the Orthodox Church in Ukraine is sought to be determined not on the basis of the opinion of its faithful, who make up a majority of the Orthodox believers in the country, but on the wishes of a minority – those who have left the Church or never belonged to it.

- On his Name Day, Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, during the liturgy in the presence of a representative of the Russian Church, said that 'when one of our brothers is characterized as a schismatic or heretic and, the more so, a whole multi-million people are outside the canonical Church, then we are called to an immediate spiritual awakening and

apostolic vigil... The Mother Church fulfils her apostolic duty when she explores the ways of salvation of our Ukrainian and Macedonian brothers. Our duty and our responsibility are to bring all nations to the Truth and church canonicity'. How would you comment this statement?

- I will not touch upon the Macedonian issue but will comment on what is said about the people of Ukraine. It is astonishing to hear from a church desk that in Ukraine a whole multi-million people are outside the church truth and canonicity and need therefore an urgent interference from outside. And what about the Ukrainian Orthodox Church with her more than 12 thousand parishes, over 200 monasteries, millions of the faithful in all parts of Ukraine – the Church headed by His Beatitude Metropolitan Onufry? In 2016, at the Synaxis of Primates of Local Orthodox Church, Patriarch Bartholomew publicly welcomed Metropolitan Onufry calling him 'the only canonical hierarch of the Orthodox Church in Ukraine, certainly, with all the rest holy bishops subordinate to him'.

It is not the Ukrainian people but the Ukrainian schismatics who are outside the communion with the Church. But the schism is a political project developed in the 1990s. A possibility for overcoming the schism has always been there and it remains. Just in December 2017, the former Metropolitan Philaret of Kiev wrote a letter to Patriarch Kirill and all the episcopate of the Russian Church, calling to reconciliation. But already the day after someone pulled him up and he disavowed all that he said in his letter. Someone in Ukraine clearly finds it disadvantageous to effect a church reconciliation in the canonical way but rather needs to legitimize the schism.

- Recently, an archimandrite stated on the Ukrainian 5 TV Channel that a Tomos on the UOC autocephaly has already been written in Constantinople and that it has been drafted by some 'canonist of genius', a University of Athens professor who writes 'absolutely perfect' texts. Is that so?

- We know nothing about such a Tomos. A Tomos is an official church document. It is granted to a canonically recognized Local Orthodox Church that has its own canonical hierarchy and its own Primate, and it is given in answer to its petition.

In our case, it is Metropolitan Onufry who is the only canonical Primate in the territory of Ukraine. He and his episcopate have not requested a Tomos. Who then will be presented with a Tomos written by a 'canonist of genius'? – the former Metropolitan Philaret Denisenko? But he is deposed and excommunicated, which is recognized by all the Local Orthodox Churches. Patriarch Bartholomew, among others, in his letter of 1992 made this comment on the denunciation of Metropolitan Philaret: 'Our Holy and Great Church of Christ, recognizing the competence of your Most Holy Russian Church on this issue as fully exclusive, accepts the synodal decision on the aforesaid'.

In the church history, there have never been Tomoses ‘payable to bearer’ – To Whom It May Concern. No conscientious canonist has ever composed such texts, and no Primate has ever signed it.

- But don’t Ukrainian politicians promise to ‘create’ a new ‘One Local Church’ with its own head and hierarchy? It follows that a Tomos might have an addressee...

- One city may have only one Orthodox bishop; one local Church may have only one Primate and one hierarchy – this is one of the fundamental principles of the Orthodox canon law. Creation of a ‘parallel’ hierarchy in the territory of an already existing Church would be a gross canonical violation, a large-scale anomaly undermining age-old principles of church administrative governance the world over.

One can make out that the Ukrainian Orthodox Church has never existed, strike it out of textbooks on church history, re-write the 1686 Deed on the transfer of the Metropolia of Kiev, shut one’s eyes to the canonicity of universal recognition of the hierarchs, with whom you have shared in prayer, to create a fictitious church administrative structure with empty churches. Some in Ukraine may be delighted at that. In the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, they have already stated bluntly that the creation of ‘A One Local Church’ is the first step towards a ‘return’ of the Ukrainian Orthodox to the Unia.

But I do not think that twelve thousand communities, thousands of clergy and monastics, hundreds of monasteries of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church will agree with an attempt to determine their fortune behind their backs. It seems to me that those who seek to write them off as history are too hasty.

And again, I believe that the opinion of other Local Churches and their common conciliar authority in this matter is underestimated.

- You are speaking of the opinion of other Local Churches but there have been no common agreements on the granting of autocephaly. Does it mean that Constantinople may have a right to act at its own discretion, as it did before?

- There are Inter-Orthodox agreements on the granting of autocephaly, indeed. I am surprised to hear that such were ostensibly absent. The document on ‘Autocephaly and the Ways of Declaring It’ was worked out and approved by the Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commission at its meeting in November 1993 at the Orthodox Center of the Patriarchate of Constantinople in Chambesy. All the Local Churches, including both the Church of Constantinople and the Church of Russia, signed it as far back as 25 years ago.

The document clearly and unambiguously indicates the two principal aspects. First, autocephaly shall

be granted to a particular part of a Local Church with the consent of the given kyriarchal Church, that is, the Church to which this church region belongs at present. Secondly, autocephaly shall be granted if there is a pan-Orthodox consensus, in this case, the consensus of the Councils of all the rest autocephalous Churches.

This document was elaborated and finally agreed upon at the Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commission in December 2009 in Chambesy. In my view, it is a model of reaching a pan-Orthodox consensus: initially, the Local Churches had different points of view on the matter but as a result of free and honest discussions they managed to reach a compromise that suited all the parties and took into account all the positions.

The adopted text was sealed by the signatures of all the participants in the meetings of Orthodox Churches. It only remained to decide on the procedure of signing the Tomos of Autocephaly and the contents of the Tomos, that is, technical matters. But to ignore and refute now the very mechanism of granting autocephaly as worked out by all the Orthodox Churches together means to make null and void the results of their interaction for the last 25 years. This step undermines all our longstanding efforts to consolidate the pan-Orthodox unity and the authority and mission of the Orthodox Church all over the world.

- Some actors of the Ukrainian schism state that inter-Orthodox unity is a phantom since each Church has her own geopolitical interests. Given all today's contradictions between Orthodox Churches, how real is the pan-Orthodox unity today?

- For those who are outside the Church, who are already in a schism from it, church unity means nothing; it is really a phantom for them, an empty sound. They are ready to undermine it further for their sake of their own interests and the interests of a particular political power. But our unity, the unity of the Orthodox Church all over the world is real and undoubtedly so for all her faithful. It is the unity of the love of Christ, the unity of the faith and knowledge in Christ, as it is called by the apostle (Eph. 4:13), and every Orthodox Christian comes to the knowledge within bounds of his or her spiritual life.

I am confident that in the Orthodox Church of Constantinople and in all the rest Orthodox Churches, the supreme authority, clergy and faithful understand it as well and feel the same. And our common duty today is to exert every effort to safeguard this unity against destruction and to prevent the emergence – under the pretext of healing the schism – of a new, more profound and serious schism that would dissect the entire body of world Orthodoxy.

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