Metropolitan Hilarion's interview to Romfea Greek church news agency

Answering questions from Romfea, a Greek church news agency, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, head of the Moscow Patriarchate department for external church relations (DECR), spoke on the recent visit of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and all Russia to the Albanian Orthodox Church, and also touched upon the religious situation in Ukraine.

- Your Eminence, you are now in the city of Tirana, the capital of Albania, where the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church is currently present on his first visit. Could you please comment on it?

- This visit of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and all Russia has a historic meaning, for it is the first time that a Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church is visiting the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania.

The relationship between our Churches goes back decades. For instance, exactly 70 years ago, in April 1948, Albania was visited by a delegation of the Russian Orthodox Church headed by Bishop Nestor of Uzhhorod and Mukachevo who took part in the episcopal consecration of Archimandrite Paisius (Voditsa) – the future Primate of the Albanian Orthodox Church. Due to the well-known tragic events in the life of Orthodoxy in Albania in the 20th century, these relations have been weakened, but in recent years they have been growing stronger: we keep a warm memory of the numerous visits of His Beatitude Archbishop Anastasios to the Moscow Patriarchate, the last of which took place at the end of last year . We hope that the first peace visit of the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church to Albania will open a new page in the history of relations between our Churches.

- A few days ago the Ecumenical Patriarchate accepted for consideration the issue of granting autocephaly in Ukraine. How was this decision taken in the Russian Church?

- We found it bewildering. Neither His Holiness Patriarch Kirill, nor the Metropolitan Onufry of Kiev and All Ukraine have been informed of the decision. In the published statement it says that the Synod "accepted the petition for granting the autocephaly from the church and political representatives of many millions of Orthodox Ukrainians." According to the official state statistics, the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church consists of more than twelve thousand communities throughout Ukraine. That is twice as many as both groups of the Ukrainian schism combined.

The real state of spiritual life in the canonical Ukrainian Church and in the Ukrainian schism is clearly seen if, for example, we compare the number of monastics. There are now almost 5000 monastics in the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church. In the so-called Kiev Patriarchate there are a little more than 200 people of the monastery population, and in the so-called autocephalous church there are only 15 people for 12 monasteries. The media sometimes refers to the data paid for by certain sponsors of sociological polls, but the figures given in them cannot be combined with what we see with our own eyes and which is easy to verify.

In reality, millions of Orthodox believers in Ukraine belong to our Church and this is clearly demonstrated by the large-scale processions of the canonical Church throughout Ukraine, which annually gather hundreds of thousands of worshipers. Why were our brethren in Constantinople not interested in the opinion of these millions of believers? Granting the autocephaly to a schism in spite of the will of the canonical Church from which it came out has no future. It will lead not to the unification of Orthodoxy, but to the deepening of already existing divisions and further destabilization of Ukrainian society.

- However, does a decision to grant autocephaly require the consent of all the Churches? Does not the Ecumenical Patriarchate have the right to move forward on this issue in the same manner as it was done when autocephaly was granted to the Russian Church?

- While being in Moscow in 1589, Patriarch of Constantinople Jeremiah II announced that the Patriarchal dignity had been granted to the Russian Church. In those days, it was impossible for him to quickly communicate with the rest of the Eastern Patriarchs. However, other primates were not content that their brother acted alone, without their participation. Even when the Patriarch of Constantinople Jeremiah, the Antiochian Patriarch Joachim and the Patriarch of Jerusalem Sophronius approved the establishment of the Patriarchate in Russia in 1590, it was not recognized on the Pan-Orthodox level, because the Patriarch of Alexandria, st. Meletius Pegas, who was absent at the Council, disputed this

decision. And only when the Patriarchal dignity of the Russian Church was approved by all the four Eastern Patriarchs representing the Orthodox plenitude at the new Council in Constantinople in 1593, only then did it gain an undisputed authority.

The procedure for the proclamation of a new autocephalous Church had been repeatedly and carefully examined during the preparation for the Holy and Great Council. The consensus of all the Local Orthodox Churches was then established as to how this should happen. There was an agreement over a procedure that would include all parties involved: the kiriarchal Church as the initiator of granting autocephaly to its part, the Patriarch of Constantinople as a coordinator in finding the consensus of Local Churches, and, finally, all autocephalous Orthodox Churches without the coordinated will of which granting autocephaly to any church structure would be impossible. We managed to agree upon everything except technical, protocol issues like the order of signatures. On the rest of the issues we all agreed.

What then do we see in the current situation? The process of proclaiming autocephaly is initiated not only without the consent of the kiriarchal Church - the Russian Orthodox Church, but is even bypassing the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Instead, the fate of Orthodoxy in Ukraine is determined by schismatics, government authorities of the secular state and members of parliament, many of whom are Uniates or representatives of other religions and denominations. Could such autocephaly be approved by the signatures of the Primates of the Local Orthodox Churches?

- Your Eminence, could it be that the topic of autocephaly is related to the upcoming presidential elections in Ukraine? Do you think that the President of Ukraine is using this delicate religious matter for that reason?

- The project of the so-called United local church in Ukraine has been initiated by the acting government authorities, schismatic groups and Greek Catholics. Politicians see this as an opportunity to successfully launch an election campaign amid the worsening economic situation in the country. Schismatics who, with the support of the authorities, continue to seize churches of the canonical Church in Ukraine urgently need legalization and support of any of the canonical Churches of the Orthodox world.

For the Uniates this enterprise of uniting the schismatics and them gaining an official status in the Orthodox world is just another project aimed at subordinating Orthodoxy to Rome. The first appeal of the Verkhovna Rada to Patriarch Bartholomew in 2016 was initiated by deputies, most of whom are

Uniates. The current project is also implemented with the active support of government officials and deputies belonging to the Uniate Church. The hierarchs of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church are bluntly saying that the recognition of non-canonical denominations by the Patriarchate of Constantinople is only the first step, and what should come next is the "the unification of all the Churches of Vladimir's baptism". Well, do the Uniates also want to receive autocephaly? No, they want the Orthodox «to return to loyalty to Rome».

The main slogan of the supporters of autocephaly – “An independent Church for an independent state” – is also false and anti-church in its core. If this premise is true, then we need to divide other historical Local Churches – the Churches of Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, Serbia and so on - into many parts according to the number of countries that belong to their canonical jurisdiction.

By the way, here's what's interesting: none of the Ukrainian politicians object to the unity of the Ukrainian Greek Catholics or Roman Catholics with Rome. Why then does the unity of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church with the Moscow Patriarchate provoke such a frenzied reaction?

- How do you see the aftermath of granting autocephaly in Ukraine? Will there be a kind of a "cold war"?

- We know that for a number of years there has been no Eucharistic communion between the two ancient Patriarchates, Antioch and Jerusalem, and that despite the efforts made by the Patriarchate of Constantinople and other Local Orthodox Churches, this painful problem has not been solved. Note that in this case we are talking about a single parish located in the capital of Qatar - Doha, the size of which does not even exceed a hundred people.

It is frightening to even imagine what might happen if the scenario of granting autocephaly to Ukrainian schismatics is realized in practice. We must understand that the scale of the problem will be fundamentally different - the matter will concern the fate of not just one parish, as it is in the case in Qatar, but of more than 12 thousand parishes of our Church.

The schism in the world Orthodoxy, which will be the inevitable consequence of this wrong action, can only be compared with the division between East and West in 1054. If this happens, Orthodox unity will be buried. Therefore, personally, I would not even like to try to imagine "the aftermath" in any way. But I believe that the joint position of the Local Orthodox Churches, repeatedly expressed in the past, will

continue to keep the universal Orthodoxy from schism. This same joint position will sooner or later return the schismatics to the bosom of the Church. I believe in it and I pray for it.

- In conclusion, I would like to ask you to say a few words about Archbishop Anastasios of Albania and about the significant work he has been doing for many years.

- I have known His Beatitude for many years. We used to meet at various inter-Orthodox and inter-Christian forums where I had the opportunity to see the wisdom, depth of theological thought and attention of the Albanian Primate to everything that was related to the life of the Church and to the service of preaching the Gospel of Christ to those who *were afar off, and to them that were nigh* (Eph. 2:17).

It is due to such qualities of this outstanding theologian and missionary that the Albanian Orthodox Church, which suffered severe persecution in the past century, was revived. The Russian Orthodox Church had endured the same persecutions, so we are especially glad to see the ecclesiastical life in Albania flourish, committed by the self-sacrificing feat of its Primate, episcopate, clergy and laity.

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