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 a number of issues concerning inter-Orthodox relations, the situation in the Middle East and the situation of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

- **In the beginning of last December there were celebrations in Moscow on the occasion of the centenary of the restoration of Patriarchate in the Russian Orthodox Church. Your Eminence, what are the results of these celebrations, what is their message to the world?**

- The celebration in Moscow were devoted to the commemoration of the beginning the 1917-1917 All-Russia Local Council one hundred years ago and its major historic decisions: on the restoration of Patriarchate in the Russian Orthodox Church and the election of Metropolitan Tikhon, glorified by our Church as saint and confessor, to the Patriarchal see.

The significance of these events goes far beyond the boundaries of the internal life of the Russian Orthodox Church. The 1917 Council was attended by outstanding representatives of the Serbian and Romanian Orthodox Churches, including the future Patriarch Nikodim of Romania. It is possible that Patriarchal Office was restored in the Serbian Orthodox Church not without the influence of the Council of Moscow, and Patriarchate was also declared in the Romanian Church in 1925.

The commemoration of the great events of 1917 gathered together in Moscow representative delegation from almost all the Local Orthodox Churches, most of them led by their Primates.

The principal message that the celebrations sent to the external world is I believe a testimony to the unity of the Holy Orthodox Church which has withhold the blows of unprecedentedly hard trials that befell her in the last century, thus reaffirming the promise of her Divine Founder: *On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it* (Mt. 16:18). The Russian Revolution developed into a severest persecution of the Russian Orthodox Church, a catastrophe for the peoples of Russia. Our contemporaries and the coming generations should draw a lesson from the tragic history of the 20th century: any attempts to create a paradise on earth without God are fraught with serious and sometimes catastrophic consequences for people.

- **How will you comment on the absence of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and**

Archbishop Ieronymos of Athens and All Greece from the celebrations?

- Of course, we would like to have the Primates of the Orthodox Churches of Constantinople and Greece to be with us at the celebrations marking the centenary of the restoration of Patriarchate in the Russian Orthodox Church. This centenary has both joyful and sad sides; indeed, it was 100 years ago that large-scale persecutions began against the faithful in our Motherland. St. Paul said about the body of the Church: *If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it* (1 Cor. 12:26). Both the ministry of confession fulfilled by St. Patriarch Tikhon and the feat performed by the new martyrs are the common property of the entire Orthodox Church. It is a pity that circumstances prevented His Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew and His Beatitude Archbishop Ieronymos of Athens from coming to Moscow. But it is in no way diminished our love for the Church of Greece and our Mother Church of Constantinople. It was the message from Patriarch Bartholomew that was voiced before all the addresses made by Primates of Local Orthodox Churches during the Bishops' Council of the Russian Church.

- **Along with others, these celebrations were also attended by representatives of the Bulgarian Church. How do you see the Bulgarian Church's interference in the issue of the so-called schismatic 'Macedonian Church' and what is the position of Moscow on this matter?**

- There is in the Russian Orthodox Church a deep concern for the fate of Orthodoxy in the land of old Ohrid from which missionaries came to Kiev Rus' in the 10th century, who introduced our ancestors to Holy Orthodox faith and the treasures of Slavic literature and culture. It is very important that the Orthodox faithful who live in that land today as heirs of the rulers of bygone times should return to canonical communion with all the Orthodox world.

We are aware of the attention given by the Bulgarian Orthodox Church to the Macedonian church problem. At the same time, it is our conviction that the problems of the Macedonian church settlement should be solved in a strictly canonical vein – which is impossible to achieve without taking into account the paramount role of the Serbian Orthodox Church in this process; for it is from this Church that the Macedonian Church broke 50 years ago.

- **US President Donald Trump has recognized Jerusalem as the capital city of Israel. Do you think it will create problems for the present status of holy places, since this decision has already caused a division both in the region and through the world?**

- Jerusalem is a holy city for three world religions. It is a city with a very complicated history and intricate fate. Equally intricate is the status of many holy places venerated by Christians, Jews and Muslims. For instance, the Lord's Sepulcher is actually divided between different Christian confessions

that historically have had their own centers in Jerusalem. The Orthodox, the Catholics, the Armenians, the Ethiopians, the Copts, the Syrians have their own side-altars in this church and their own special time for prayer in the Kouvouklion. At the same time, as is known, the church keys have been kept for centuries by the Muslims. Standing for over one thousand years at the place of the old Jerusalem temple, sacred for the Jews, are the Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa mosques, the latter being one of the most important places for the followers of Islam.

In the last decades, more or less peaceful relations have been established between Christians, Muslims and Jews, but we know that it has not always been so. The relative tranquility in the city, which has been preserved to this day, has been maintained through the observance of a certain balance of powers and interests. Any violation of this balance can lead to an upsurge of indignation, which regrettably we can already see and which can make a negative impact on the unique nature of Jerusalem as a city of peaceful co-existence between people of three Abrahamic religions. I hope that it will not happen.

- The Bishops' Council of the Russian Church rejected the decisions of the Holy and Great Council in Crete. Don't you think that such a step could shake the unity of universal Orthodoxy?

- The Bishops' Council, which took place last December, did not reject these decisions but nor did bring anything fundamentally new to the position taken by the Russian Orthodox Church on the Council in Crete, which was basically formulated by the Holy Synod already in July 2016. We cannot recognize this Council in the status in which we all hoped it should have taken place, since it was conducted in violation of the principle of consensus of all the commonly recognized Local Autocephalous Churches. A number of Local Churches called for a postponement of the Council and consequently did not take part in it when their call was not heard. In this connection, the decisions made in Crete cannot be regarded as valid for all Orthodox Churches or obligatory for them.

Local Churches vary in their assessment of the Council on Crete. However, I can say with confidence that this matter does not separate us from each other, nor does it prevent us from communion and common celebration of the Divine Liturgy. It was also evidenced by the celebrations last December on the occasion of the centenary of the restoration of Patriarchate in the Russian Church, which were attended by the Primates and representatives of almost all the autocephalous Churches. I am sure that Local Churches, regardless of their attitude to the Council on Crete, should continue developing common Orthodox cooperation; indeed, it is only through common efforts that we can overcome the differences still remaining among us and consolidate the unity of the Holy Orthodox Church.

- Your Eminence, in conclusion it is desirable to hear your comment on the situation in Ukraine today. And how you think peace should be achieved in that region?

- For the Orthodox in Russia and Belarus, Ukraine is not a strange country. Kiev is the cradle of Russian Orthodoxy and the oldest see of the Russian Orthodox Church. It is with great compassion that we follow the developments of the last years in the country: instability, the armed conflict in Donbas, the ensuing radicalization of the political atmosphere. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church is the largest confession of the country; it remains apolitical and does not support any side of the conflict. It makes it possible for her to preserve the peacemaking potential which really unites Ukraine. But in Ukraine now there are forcible attempts to unite the canonical Church with the schism.

Just imagine what will begin if, for instance, the authorities in Greece will set to unite the canonical Greek Orthodox Church with one of the local non-canonical entities? Say, the churches belonging to the canonical Church in Greece would be forcibly, with the police's support, begin to be handed over to the so-called 'Old Calendar believers' under the pretext that such is an alleged wish of some faithful? This is exactly what is going on in Ukraine. Moreover, in Ukraine attempts are made to legalize this process through the adoption of several bills discriminating the faithful of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

Standing behind the attempt to create the so-called 'one local church' in Ukraine is another threat. Both the proponents of this bill and representatives of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church have begun openly stating that the aim of the forcible unification of the Orthodox in Ukraine is their eventual joining the Greek Catholic *unia*. The influence made by the Greek Catholic Church on the status of the Orthodox Church in Ukraine is of a hidden nature but it cannot be underestimated. Have you heard about an appeal to His Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew to grant autocephaly that was sent by the Ukrainian Parliament last year? All the initiators of this appeal are known, and most of them are Greek Catholics.

During the recent meeting with representatives of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, His Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew stressed that problems of church unity can be solved only by canonical, not political methods. The same stand is taken by the Primates of other Local Orthodox Churches, who repeatedly expressed their support for the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. The primary threat to the confessional peace in Ukraine lies in the interference of politicians in the internal life of the Church. We are grateful to our Orthodox brothers for the fact that they see this treat to Orthodoxy in Ukraine and ask them to pray for the return of peace and mutual understanding to the country.

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