THE FIRST HIERARCH OF THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH : THE MINISTRY OF THE BISHOP IS INEXTRIABLY LINKED TO THE ORTHODOX UNDERSTANDING OF CONCILIARITY

This year marks the 1950th anniversary of the martyrs' deaths of the Holy and All-Praised leaders of the Apostles Peter and Paul. This gives us cause to ponder once more our faith in the Apostolic Church and recall that one of the most important manifestations of apostolic ministry is witness to the Truth and preaching of the Gospel, the First Hierarch of the Russian Orthodox Church noted at in his speech on the 29th of November before the participants of the Episcopal Council at the Christ the Saviour Cathedral in Moscow. "As the apostles imparted Christ's teaching, so too must their heirs – the bishops – be guardians and preachers of this very truth. We are called upon to bring the Gospel to people – the Good News that calls the human person into communion with him, and that this is why he sent his Only-Begotten Son into the world (cf. Gal 4.4)," His Holiness emphasized.

The First Hierarch noted that there had never been such a huge number of bishops in the Russian Church as now. His Holiness the Patriarch believes that this opens up in our Church life a previously unforeseen opportunity for the episcopate to become closer to the clergy and the people.

"The bishop as the one who ministers to the clergy and the people of God, as an image of the shepherd who leads his flock, is the one who is close by and accessible, who can be found not only in the sacred space of the sanctuary or in the inaccessible quiet of his office, but whom one can see, to whom one can turn, who is open to conversation and who not theoretically but practically shows an example to the clergy and the laity through his life in Christ in exactly the same way as the apostles," said His Holiness the Patriarch. He also reminded his listeners that the bishop as the heir to the apostles is the one who celebrates the divine services by leading the Church community in prayer at the Holy Eucharist: "Through the celebration of the Liturgy we are called upon to show that there is no and before the Second Coming of Christ will not be any more relevant commandment of the Lord than to celebrate the mystical recollection of his death and resurrection. And there is nothing that can open up for us blessed eternity other than the Divine Banquet of the Holy Eucharist."

As his Holiness noted, the archpastors are to make every effort to ensure that the people take a fully conscious part in worship and that nobody should perceive divine worship as being outdated even as a magnificent tradition or, which is worse still, as an onerous duty bestowed upon us by two thousand years of history.

Episcopal service is inextricably linked to the Orthodox understanding of conciliarity, that is, the catholicity of the Church, the First Hierarch stressed further. Mentioning that the word *sobornost* is the translation into Slavonic of the Greek word *katholiki*, which points towards the universal nature of the Church, towards her integrity in time and space, His Holiness Patriarch Kirill noted: “This testifies to the fact that conciliarity, which manifests itself in the Church’s historical life, including in the external and of course essential institutions of collegiality, cannot be reduced to this. In the Acts of the aforementioned Local Council of 1917 – 1918, as at the councils of the early Church, the power of the Holy Spirit was revealed, acting in human frailty. The Council began its work at the catastrophic time of the destruction of Russia’s historical statehood. In the Church herself, under the influence of the atmosphere of the time, differences between the white clergy and the black clergy, between city archpriests and rural priests, between liberals and conservatives, between monarchists who wept for the past and those who welcomed with joy the events of February, became ever more acute. All of these tendencies were represented at the Council. The power of the Holy Spirit turned a human gathering, pulling in various directions and extremely heterogeneous, into a genuine Council so that its participants could say of its main decisions: ‘It seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us’ (Acts 15.28). In particular, by the time the Local Council opened, one of the main topics of dispute among representatives of various currents was how the hierarchical principle could be reconciled with the principle of conciliarity. And, in spite of the fact that the adherents of the idea of restoring the Office of Patriarch did not initially sway the argument, later the Council’s participants saw in the Patriarch a spiritual figure who unites all liturgically and symbolically, and the decision to elect a Patriarch was received with enthusiasm by the Fullness of the Russian Church. It is no accident that it was towards St. Tikhon that all the healthy forces gravitated during the time when the godless authorities persecuted people for their faith by means of causing schisms and organizing provocations in order to destroy the body of the Church. The persecutors’ endeavours providentially ensured that the canonical Church would be called the ‘Patriarchal’ Church.”

His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia stressed that in the twenty first century, as in previous ages, the ministry of the bishops, in order to be truly conciliar, ought to combine the preservation of institutions defined by Tradition with a constant awareness to the conciliar voice of the Church and, as St. Vincent of Lérins said, “to hold that faith which has been believed everywhere, always and by all.”

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