



Metropolitan Hilarion: We should move forward preserving and strengthening our unity

Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, head of the Moscow Patriarchate department for external church relations, has given an interview to the Greek Romphaia web portal.

- Your Eminence, these days you are in Athens for a brief visit. Which topics did you discuss with Archbishop Ieronymos during your meeting with him?

- I have decided to use an opportunity to visit Athens on my way to Leros Island where I will attend a meeting of the monitoring committee of the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue. I am grateful to His Beatitude Ieronymos, Archbishop of Athens and All Greece, for having found an opportunity for meeting with me. We had a brief but substantial talk. I conveyed to His Beatitude best regards and best wishes from His Holiness Patriarch Kirill. I also told him about the significant dates marked by our Church this year, since it is the centenary of the 1917 Revolution and the beginning of persecution of the Church and at the same time the centenary of the restoration of the Patriarchal Office.

- The Archbishop gave a warm welcome to you. Was there any response on his part concerning his visit to Russia?

- I did not expect an immediate answer from His Beatitude but I told him that we would be very glad to see him in the fold of the Russian Church. If he comes, we will organize a program for him and host him with great love and great respect.

- Your Eminence, Vatican secretary of state Cardinal Pietro Parolin has been to Moscow recently. Does it mean the beginning of a new stage in the development of dialogue between the Vatican and the Russian Church? In connection with this visit, the Patriarch has made remarkable statements.

- A new page was opened by the historic meeting of Patriarch Kirill and Pope Francis in Havana. The present visit of Cardinal Parolin was, first of all, a state one since, as is known, the Vatican is a recognized state and the cardinal as the Vatican state secretary came at the invitation of the Russian leadership. At the same time, he also met with His Holiness Patriarch Kirill, while his visit began with a meeting with me. The meeting with the Patriarch lasted one hour forty minutes, while with me it lasted two hours. We had very substantial talks on a wide range of issues concerning the international agenda.

Certainly, we talked in the first place about what was in the focus of the meeting that the Patriarch and the Pope had in Havana – the situation of Christians in the Middle East.

- You spoke about Syria. We know how important the participation of Russia in the solution of the existing problem was. In my opinion, it is Russia that has stopped the war there. Does the Russian Church continue giving humanitarian aid to the Syrian people?

- The Church is directly involved in rendering humanitarian aid to the Syrian people as we give this aid together with the Russian state. We have also initiated a fund-raising campaign in aid to the population of Syria, which is now carried out by the traditional confessions in the Russian Federation.

At the same time, we have continued the efforts for a political settlement of the Syrian crisis. In this matter, our Church has continued dialogue with the leadership of the Russian Federation.

- I would like to touch upon another topic as well. What are relations between the Russian Church and the Ecumenical Patriarchate at present, a years and a half after the Council of Crete? Are there any talks on this topic, unknown to us?

- We have traditionally fraternal relations with the Ecumenical Patriarchate. I hope to pay a personal visit to His Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew in September. I think, despite the complexities that have arisen due to the conduct of the Council of Crete, we should move forward and preserve and strengthen our unity. I hope that the coming months will become a time when we will be able to consolidate this unity even stronger.

- Your Eminence, if I may, I would like to remain within this topic. What I am going to say is very relevant for Greece as there are clergy groups in the country who have stopped to mention Patriarch Bartholomew during the liturgy because of the Council of Crete. Do you agree with such actions?

- Indeed, we do not agree with these groups and with the very method used by these groups to make their case. But in the depths of our Church there are similar groups and we should be sensitive to such sentiments. We remember very well the still continued schism that arose in the 17th century in Russia, which was not provoked by any theological or dogmatic issues but solely ritual ones.

- What you are saying is very important, Your Eminence...

- For this reason we try to monitor such moods arising in our flock and to respond to them. Certainly, we are aware that there are groups who consciously try to rock the church boat. But at the same time, there

are also believers who are critical of some points in the Council of Crete's documents for various theological reasons. And we should learn to distinguish a conscious and aggressive attack on the Church from people's real concern.

- There is another important and pressing issue of concern to people. A few years ago B. Obama met with Patriarch Kirill. Is a meeting between the Patriarch and the present US President D. Trump possible, for discussing the situation of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church?

- I believe D. Trump's actions at the present moment, to a considerable extent, are conditioned by an internal, very difficult political crisis in America. The most part of the political establishment staked on a different presidential candidate and the mass media was preparing the mass conscience for the coming of a different president. But it happened so that the people chose Trump and those who were against him are doing everything possible to prevent him from implementing the intentions he declared in the course of the election campaign. What this all will end in is very difficult to predict but it is quite obvious that President Trump is not quite free in his actions.

- Apparently, the Ukrainian problem is still unsettled. What is the position of the Russian Church on this?

- From our point of view, there is only one way of solving the Ukrainian problem: it is when those who have broken away from the Church will repent and come back to the bosom of the Church. For two thousand years the Church has not invented any other way of reuniting with those who broke away. It is with understanding and full compassion that we treat those who came to believe within the schism, possibly without being aware that it was a schism. Responsibility for this schism lies with its initiators, while ordinary people cannot be responsible for the actions of those church leaders who have encroached on the seamless robe of Christ.

Regrettably, in today's Ukraine the church theme is very strongly intertwined with political rhetoric and the idea is propagated that an independent state should have an independent Church. But in this way we will have to divide many Local Churches into small parts. Such ideas can only weaken the world Orthodoxy, while for the one multi-million and multi-national Russian Church such ideas are categorically unacceptable.

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church has all the characteristic features of self-governance; she is subordinate to no one administratively or financially; she has her own Synod, her own Council of

Bishops; they elect hierarchs independently; they do not send any accounts to Moscow.

His Beatitude Metropolitan of Kiev is a permanent member of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church, and its membership always includes one more member from the Ukrainian Church. That is, among fifteen members of the Synod there are two members from Ukraine and they can exert influence on the life of the Russian Orthodox Church. In the Ukrainian Church Synod, however, there is not a single person from Moscow. So, the Ukrainian Church is fully independent in her decisions, while only preserving devotional and spiritual ties with the Moscow Patriarchate. Therefore, when they say in today's Ukraine that the Ukrainian Church is dependent on Moscow, it is simply a lie.

- What you, Your Eminence, are saying is very important since many are completely ignorant of what you have said. If there is time, I would like to ask a question. Recently in Georgia there was an attempt on the life of Patriarch Iliya. And Patriarch Kirill is accused of having a numerous bodyguards around him, which, they say, runs contrary to the Orthodox spirit. May be the Russian Church thus wants to forestall an attempt at the Patriarch's life?

- The decision to protect the Patriarch on this level was made, if I am not mistaken, as far back as under President B. Yeltsin. And it was not the Patriarch's decision but the decision made by the state power. In a state there is a certain table of ranks that includes people protected in a certain way, and this level of protection is defined by the state, first of all, for security purposes. It is a state decision.

- In addition to the topics I mentioned, are there any questions you would like to speak of?

- I recalled my first visit to Athens in 1992, when I was a young hieromonk. The first thing I wanted to see what the Areopagus in which St. Paul preached. I asked somebody the way to the Areopagus and was given the number of a bus, which took too long though. Finally, the driver pointed to some modern building and said, 'Here is the Areopagus'. It was really an Areopagus but not quite the one I looked for (since the word *areopagus* is used for the Supreme Court).

Next time I set off on foot, reached the Acropolis, wandered there for a long time in an attempt to find some traces of the ancient Areopagus until the moment when I finally bumped into a metallic stele with an inscription in Old Greek. Having read the first words of that text I realized that it was the speech of St. Paul in the Areopagus. I thought then that there were few speeches in human history deserved carving into metal with gild letters.

Every time coming to Athens I recall that first visit of mine, and though already over a quarter of a century has passed I always look at this hill with emotions, imagining how the great apostle laid the foundation of Christian faith on that hill.

- **Remarkable words, Your Eminence.**

- Recently I have finished a book about St. Paul. It is a biography written on the basis of the Book of Acts and his own Epistles. For me it is a great joy to be here, in the city sanctified by the feet of this great apostle.

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