



Patriarch Kirill meets with attendees of Third Summer Theological Institute for Catholic Priests



August 30, 2017 – His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia met with the attendees of the Third Summer Theological Institute for Catholic Priests, at the Red Hall of the Church of Christ the Saviour in Moscow.

The group was accompanied by Rev. P. Hyacinthe Destivelle of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

Participating in the meeting were Metropolitan Hilarion, head of the Moscow Patriarchate department for external church relations (DECR), Rev. Alexiy Dikarev, DECR staff member, and Deacon Dimitry Serov, head of the international department of the Ss Cyril and Methodius Institute of Post-Graduate Studies.

Welcoming the guests, Patriarchate Kirill said, 'It seems to me a good idea that the so-called Summer Institute for the Roman Catholic Clergy can meet in Moscow and that representatives of our Church

could in the same way visit Rome, the Vatican and have an opportunity to meet the leadership and familiarize themselves with the life of the Roman Catholic Church'. In this way, His Holiness said, a system of mutual knowledge of the life the two Churches is shaping.

'Why am I speaking about a system? – Because there used to be occasional exchanges of the same kind in the past as well. When I occupied the same post in our Church as His Eminence Hilarion does now, I organized such reciprocal trips several times and even accompanied one of them to Rome. But those were isolated trips while now we have a system which will help the young clergy of the two Churches to come to a better knowledge of each other'.

His Holiness noted that the establishment of such a system stems from his meeting with Pope Francis of Rome that took place in 2016 in Havana. 'That meeting gave a living and strong impetus to the development of our bilateral relations. Among its very vivid consequences is the bringing of the relics of St. Nicholas from Bari to Russia. It was quite a special event filled with tremendous spiritual power'.

His Holiness recalled that about two and a half million people venerated the relics within only the two months of the relics' stay in Moscow and St. Petersburg.

'Once it was believed that the greatest number of people who take part in pilgrimage is associated with coming to Mecca. But I looked into the number of pilgrims visiting Mecca annually – about two million. More people came to St. Nicholas in Russia than Muslims come to Mecca from all over the world. I wonder how many millions would venerate the relics if they had stayed here for a whole year. It was a very important spiritual factor for strengthening the faith of our people. People stood in long lines for six, eight, ten hours to venerate the shrine. This summer has been very rainy, there were heavy rains, but everybody kept standing and nobody complained. His Holiness stressed that people of all walks of life came to venerate the honorable relics of St. Nicholas.

'When I was seeing off the relics in St. Petersburg, I addressed the people with words expressing the idea that none of the church diplomatic or simply diplomatic action did as much for drawing East and West closer together as the bringing of the relics of St. Nicholas to Russia did. The very fact that we have common shrines has become so visible for Orthodox people in Russia that it cannot pass without a trace', His Holiness stated.

He also expressed the conviction that such events and, generally, the opportunity for the faithful of the two Churches to come in touch with each other's spiritual experience is the most powerful factor that helps to further the development of inter-church relations. 'I believe the reciprocal visits of shrines should become part of a joint action program aimed to develop relations between the Churches'.

His Holiness also spoke of other very important consequences stemming from the Havana meeting. One of them is the common witness to the tragedy of Christians in the Middle East. 'The fact that in our Joint Declaration with Pope Francis we clearly stated the fact of the tragedy, actually a genocide of the Christian presence in the Middle East, had a great importance and consequences for the international community'.

He reminded the guests that when Christians raised the point that the international community should pay attention to the situation of Christians, they would usually hear this response: Well, not only Christians are suffering; let us speak about the others. It was, in my view, a very sly and unscrupulous approach to the assessment of the present situation in the Middle East. On the international level, they tried to avoid assessing the situation of Christians in the Middle East as genocide and generally avoided using this term altogether. However, soon after our Joint Declaration was issued, American Congress referred to the genocide against Christians in the Middle East. Now the term 'genocide' with regard to the situation of Christians in that region is actually introduced in the usage on the level of international communication. It is very important that we managed to draw attention to the tragedy of Christianity and Christians in the place in which Christianity emerged'.

Patriarch Kirill also described as very important the Joint Declaration statements devoted to Ukraine; first of all the fact that the Russian Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church clearly stated: in the Ukrainian crisis the role of Churches should be aimed at establishing peace. 'You know that from the very beginning our Church has stated that the mission of a Church in such a conflict, which takes place in Ukraine today, can be only peacemaking one. Our Church's flock is there, in both the east and the west of Ukraine and also in its center. How a Church can identify herself with some or others or thirds? It means to become an enemy for some. A Church cannot become an enemy of anyone'.

The Russian Orthodox Church found herself in a similar situation in the 90s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, His Holiness said. 'At that time there was a serious political turbulence in Russia as different political parties and forces very strongly clashed. Each of them wanted the Church to be with it. Democrats would say: We destroyed communism; the Communist Party oppressed you; so you should be together with us against communists. Communists would say: We are a patriotic force while these new parties are all pro-Western, unpatriotic, so you should be with us against these parties. We said: No, it is impossible. It must not be like this: one comes up to a church and asks oneself: who are in this church – my friends or enemies? None should make up one's mind whether to enter a church or not on the basis of one's political preferences. A Church should be a common space for all. She should not identify herself with political programs. She has a program of her own, based on the Gospel. And our task is to convey to the modern man, regardless of his political views, the Christian message in a way that he may respond to it'.

His Holiness referred to the common stand expressed on Ukraine in the Joint Declaration. It reads in particular, 'We invite our Churches in Ukraine to work towards social harmony'. 'We believe it to be a very important and positive factor with regard to Ukraine', he said.

Patriarch Kirill also spoke briefly about uniatism: 'There was very much struggle around this topic; much blood was spilt. The impropriety and danger of uniatism lied in the fact that it was an attempt to establish equality with one part of the Church through division with the other part of the Church: to unite with Rome and to break relationships with its own communities. And where there is a rupture there is always division, blood and pain. It is remarkable that together with the Pope we said: Uniatism is not a method of overcoming divisions'.

In their declaration, Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill also expressed a shared understanding of the need to defend the Christian foundations of European life and European civilization. 'What is happening in Western Europe and North America today causes a great pain in our hearts', Patriarch Kirill testified, 'The refusal to understand that it was Christian sources that defined the development of European civilization is historically wrong and leads to very dangerous consequences for the life of Europeans. When Europeans reflected on the creation of a European constitution, the idea to mention the Christian roots of European civilization was rejected, as you know. And the later developments showed that in the awareness of many Europeans there is really an emerging idea that Europe has completed the stage in her development based on Christian values'.

In this context, His Holiness mentioned the words of the late Pope John Paul II about the need for a new evangelization of Europe. 'These are very just appeals but they were uttered in a historical situation different from the present one. And for this reason, what is happening now requires our common clear and strong response. And not only along the line of the Joint Declaration, but also along the line of joint actions'.

Patriarch Kirill said that struggle around these issues is going on in Russia, too. 'But we thank God that the message that our Church addresses to people, especially in the sphere of family morality, is taken today positively by an absolute majority of society, including an absolute majority in our parliament. The only question that we continue discussing is the problem of abortion. But in the recent time, more and more people, including deputies of the parliament, come to the awareness of the need to introduce restrictive measures with regard to the practice of abortion. We will continue working with our society and our politicians so that the Christian understanding of abortion as a sin may penetrate the awareness of most of our people. The situation in Russia in this respect is rather complicated because the Soviet Union was the first country in the world to lift up any restriction on abortion. It happened soon after the 1917 Revolution and already four generations have grown up who recognize this practice as a norm'.

Therefore, today the message of the Church is aimed at re-formatting people's awareness, but, as Patriarch Kirill noted, due to inertia, which developed on the basis of the existing tradition, it is difficult to achieve. Therefore, special attention is given now to the work with youth.

'We are gratified to note the great successes made in several Catholic dioceses in Europe and in other countries which work with the youth. We are very thoroughly studying, in particular, the experience of the Polish Catholic Church. We understand it very well because it is a matter of Slavic societies. Though there are many things which create difficulties in relations between the Poles and the Russians, there is something that opens up opportunities for mutual understanding. For instance, many people in our Church have great sympathy for the Catholic Church's work with the youth in that country. We can see positive results of this work'.

Patriarch Kirill told the attendees of the Third Summer Theological Institute for Catholic Priest about the establishment of the necessary structure in the Russian Orthodox Church for developing work in this area. 'In almost all the parishes except for very small ones, there is a special person responsible for youth work. Today a serious work for organizing a volunteers movement is carried out throughout the country. In many universities there are Orthodox priests, and churches and chapels are opened. But there is a long way ahead to be covered for us to feel that our efforts lead to visible and considerable results'.

According to His Holiness, today's youth in Russia and in the post-Soviet space is under the influence of two considerable factors creating difficulties for the perception of church preaching. On the one hand, these are rudiments of the old atheistic atmosphere in the country, upbringing by parents whose everyday-life atheism makes an impact on their children's and students' perception of the world. At the same time, the rudiments of Soviet atheism are aggravated by the very strong influence of the modern Western civilization with its consumerist values and accents on material life and its disdain for spiritual life. 'But despite all these difficulties I would point to considerable changes for the better made in the situation with the Christianization of our youth', the Primate of the Russian Church said.

Rev. Hyacinthe Destivelle thanked His Holiness Kirill for the meeting and talk as well as for the opportunity to visit churches, monasteries and shrines of the Russian Orthodox Church. He also expressed hope for further development of the practice of the Summer Institute as it trains priests who will be engaged in implementing the program of the Joint Declaration of Pope Francis of Rome and Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia.

Then His Holiness Kirill answered questions from Roman Catholic guests.

In conclusion of the meeting His Holiness presented the guests with tokens of the meeting.

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