Metropolitan Hilarion's interview with Greek Romfea news agency

During his stay in Cyprus, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, head of the Moscow Patriarchate department for external church relations (DECR), had a talk with a journalist of the Romfea church news agency. Answering the journalist's questions, Metropolitan Hilarion spoke on the Council that took place in Crete last year, the construction of a Russian church in Cyprus, the situation of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, the situation in the Middle East and other issues.

- Your Eminence, what is the situation of Orthodoxy on the whole after the Pan-Orthodox Council that took place in Crete in which the Russian Orthodox Church did not participate?

- First of all regrettably it was not a Pan-Orthodox Council. We very much wished that a Pan-Orthodox Council could have taken place. Our Church had done all possible it could to prepare it. We hoped till the last moment that the Council in Crete would be held precisely as pan-Orthodox, and on the part of our Church, all the necessary preparation had been made for our participation in it. We even booked an hotel and air tickets. And, certainly, it was a great disappointment for us that eventually a Pan-Orthodox Council did not happen.

What happened was a council of ten Local Orthodox Church, with five Orthodox Churches not attending. In this number I also include the Orthodox Church in America that we recognize as an autocephalous Church.

Why could not we attend the Council after all? – Because we have always insisted that it should adopt all its decisions by consensus understood as agreement of all the commonly recognized Local Orthodox Churches without exception. By commonly recognized Churches we understand the fourteen Churches since there is no full consensus on the autocephaly of the Orthodox Church in America.

When it became clear that first the Bulgarian Church and then the Church of Antioch and later the Georgian Church refused to come, it meant that there would not be any consensus, and in this situation we asked the Ecumenical Patriarchate to convene an urgent Pan-Orthodox conference, as there were yet two or three weeks remaining before the Council. However, such a conference was not convened, and everybody was invited to come for the Council. And in a situation of the absence of three commonly recognized Churches we could not attend precisely for the reason that our principal condition was not fulfilled – the condition that the Council should make its decision by consensus of all the commonly recognized Local Churches.

Nevertheless, His Holiness Patriarch Kirill sent a message of greeting to the Council in Crete. We took the decision of the not-attending Churches and those who did attend with complete understanding – all making it a matter of conscience. The Council happened, and we see it as an important step towards a Pan-Orthodox Council. It is not a Pan-Orthodox Council but a step on the way to it.

At present, we continue looking into the decisions of the Council in Crete, with our theologians working. At some point we will have to evaluate these documents, but we believe that our basic task, as it was before the Council and as it is after the Council, is to strengthen the inter-Orthodox unity and to restrain from any steps that can undermine this unity.

- Recently a court in Greece brought in an acquittal on 'the Vatopedi Monastery case'. The abbot of the monastery, Archimandrite Ephraim thanked the Russian people and the Russian Church for the support they gave him at a difficult time. So, the hopes of Russia, which took Father Ephraim's side, were justified as well. How do you regard this ruling?

- Both the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian State from the very beginning supported Archimandrite Ephraim in his struggle for the restoration of justice. We did not interfere in the lawsuit but many had the impression that this case was fabricated and was anti-church one from the outset. We consistently supported Archimandrite Ephraim as the esteemed abbot of the Athonite monastery and we are glad that this case, so long and very harmful for the Church's reputation (which might be the very task of the initiators), is now over.

- Since we are in Cyprus at the moment, how would you comment on the fact of the construction of a Russian church on the island? Wouldn't it be great to see such churches in Greece as well?

- We took part today in a remarkable and very joyful event: the first ever Russian church has been built in Cyprus. It is not a church of the Russian Orthodox Church but a church of the Orthodox Church of Cyprus. But in this church, which has been built after the Russian style and with the funds of Russian benefactors, the divine services will be celebrated in Slavonic and Greek. Both Russians (who are nearly 50 thousand in Cyprus) and Cypriots may be able to come to it. I expressed hope that such Russian churches will be built in other metropolises of the Church of Cyprus as well.

It is an excellent example of inter-Orthodox solidarity and the local metropolitan's care for concrete people. I hope the example given by Metropolitan Isaiah of Tamassos and Orinis will be followed by other hierarchs not only in Cyprus but also in Greece, where there is also a great number of Russian-speaking faithful.

- Your Eminence, both His Holiness Patriarch Kirill and you personally often visit Europe. Not so long ago His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia visited England. We also know that the Hungarian government allocated funds for the restoration and construction of Orthodox churches. Does not it mean that Russia is opening up to Europe, which is deviating from her Christian roots?

- First, I would like to say that Russia has never closed itself from Europe. Actually it is Europe that closed itself from Russia. The Russian sanctions have been reciprocal ones. But political issues are not the problems in which I feel an expert.

If it concerns morality and spiritual life, I believe the Russian Church is considerably concerned about what is happening in today's Western Europe, where Christianity appears to be purposefully ousted from the public sphere. A Europe that abandons its Christian roots will abandon its own identity. It will be an amorphous organization unable to oppose external challenges.

It is my conviction that civilizationally Europe has always been and should remain a Christina continent while having been and remaining a hospitable house for both people of other religious traditions and those who do not confess any religion. I believe one does not contradict the other. But the defense of Christianity is our common task, and I wish that the voice of the Orthodox Church could resound strongly in today's Europe. It is another reason for which we should be together.

- Your Eminence, one of the pressing issues today is the Ukraine problem and in particular the situation of the Church in Ukraine – the problem of which most Greeks are unaware. What is happening in that country after all?

- In Ukraine there is a schism. It was created as a political project in 1992 when Metropolitan Filaret of Kiev, who failed to be elected Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, nursing a grievance against his fellow hierarchs of the Russian Orthodox Church who elected another man, decided to declare an 'autocephalous church'. He did it without the consent of the Russian Orthodox Church, without the consent of other Local Orthodox Churches. The episcopate of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church refused to follow him. The Orthodox flock refused to follow him. This man joined the already existing and America-based schism, within which he was eventually declared a false patriarch.

The Russian Orthodox Church urged him to repent. For having caused a schism this man was suspended. Then he was defrocked and divested as monk. Ultimately he was excommunicated. And now this anathemized gentleman calls himself patriarch. He has committed a lot of actions hostile to the Russian Orthodox Church.

The present Ukrainian state authorities in the person of many of its representatives declare a policy for creating ‘a single Local Church of Ukraine’. In their understanding, it means that the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church uniting most of the faithful in Ukraine should be torn away from the Russian Orthodox Church, with which it has been tied by age-old bonds, and made subject to this false patriarch. It means to bring in it another existing schism and to add the Greek Catholics to the entity thus created.

- Do you think the Uniates are behind this?

- No. I believe behind this are politicians who seek to interfere in church affairs.

- Since you have mentioned Ukrainian politicians, how would you comment on their frequent visits to Fanar? The request they keep making to Patriarch Bartholomew, is it the declaration of a single Local Church?

- I think the Ecumenical Patriarch has a right to receive politicians of any country and any political orientation. We fully respect the Ecumenical Patriarch and do not believe it necessary to comment on what political leaders he meets.

However, when schismatic false hierarchs appear in Fanar, it cannot but grieves us. These gentlemen publish their photos showing their meetings with hierarchs of the Patriarchate of Constantinople and disclose the content of their negotiations. Of course, we know how reliably they convey what was discussed during the meetings, but if the words of these people are to be believed, then they are supported in Fanar and promised assistance in creating a single Local Church in Ukraine by tearing away from the Russian Orthodox Church.

We do not want to believe this information, of course. We have heard many times from the Ecumenical Patriarch’s mouth his firm assurances that he believes the Ukrainian Orthodox Church led by His Beatitude Patriarch Onufry to be the only canonical Church in Ukraine. And for us these assurances of His Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew are the basis on which we build our relationships with the Patriarch of Constantinople. We believe the most important tasks for us all is to consolidate the inter-Orthodox unity and prevent anything that would destroy the established inter-church peace and accord.

- Your Eminence, the Russian Church began helping to settle the situation in Syria from the very first days. You personally have always spoken about the situation in the Middle East and the threat of extremism and terrorism. From the Russian Church’s perspective, what is the situation there today?

- First of all, it is necessary to stop the war in Syria, to drive the terrorists away from there. Until it is done it is impossible to speak about any settlement. When representatives of political circles in the West tell us that the settlement of the Syrian problem lies in banishing President Assad from Syria, we remind them that such a scenario was already used first in Iraq and then in Libya. It did not lead to either democracy or any improvement of the situation in these countries. On the contrary, we see there a real upsurge of terrorism and genocide against Christians. The situation in Syria would have developed according to the same scenario if Russia had not helped the Syrian army in the struggle with terrorism.

I believe terrorism is a challenge for the entire civilized world and to defeat it joint efforts of all people of good will are needed. As for this problem, politicians should lay their differences aside and act as a united front.

Syria also needs humanitarian aid, which we bring in as much as we can. But what we can do is a drop in the ocean as the country is destroyed, the infrastructure is ruined and tremendous efforts are needed to restore it.

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