Interview with His Holiness Patriarch Kirill on the results of his visit to the countries of Latin America

From February 11 to 22, 2016, His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia made a primatial visit to the countries of Latin America, including the Republic of Cuba, the Republic of Paraguay and the Federative Republic of Brazil. His Holiness Patriarch Kirill also made a trip to Russian Bellingshausen Station on Waterloo Island in Antarctica.

Rossiya TV: Your Holiness, here is the first question: what is your personal feeling about the meeting with Pope Francis?

It was a good meeting. Perhaps, the most important for me was the fact that there was nothing artificial or deliberate about this encounter; nor was there any posture for impressing the public. It was a sincere conversation between two men concerned about what is happening within both the Christian family and the Christian-Muslim relations, and in some sense in the world as a whole, considering the huge tension there is in relations between East and West and more precisely between Russia and NATO. And all this concern has resulted in a serious conversation with a high level of unanimity on issues, especially public ones, on which any sort of agreement between the Pope and the Patriarch seemed hard to achieve only yesterday.

By God's grace, I can say that we share a high level of consensus in assessing the developments in the human family and in the world of politics.

I would even say that we have a common understanding of what should be the position of a Christian in the face of all these formidable challenges.

NTV: Your Holiness, prior to your meeting with the Pope, many among the flock and some observers were somehow concerned about some negotiations or even agreements that

might have been concluded secretly. You know how much we all love this kind of conspiracy theories. Are these concerns justified?

I can understand them, because the Patriarch never met the Pope before. The history of relations between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church has not been trouble-free. Now I will not leaf through these troublesome pages [of our history] up to 1990s, which are so familiar to our fellow citizens. It is therefore understandable that some of our believers may ask: What is it for? What are they going to discuss? Could it result, God forbid, in modification of our doctrine? Could our liturgical life and pastoral approaches be modified?

I shall put it very frankly: there is nothing to fear about. First of all, we did not discuss any theological issues. Whether it is good or bad is a separate question, but we did not speak about theology. However, the Declaration makes one very important statement.

On the one hand, we state that during a thousand years we belonged to one Church, and we have a Tradition with a capital «T» which was not merely developed but did exist throughout that thousand years.

This is an important statement as it testifies to the existence of certain common sources and, moreover, to a thousand year-long life together. Yet, on the other hand, we speak honestly about divisions and differences. We state that we still differ in our understanding of the Holy Trinity. True, this division has come from the past but we remain on the positions that our fathers used to defend, witnessing to the emergence of this division between East and West.

The meeting was in no way aimed at promoting some theological agreements. Firstly, it would be a completely wrong approach. It is impossible even to pull the Churches together and much less to reunite them through some agreements between the two leaders. I will go further and say that even if such an agreement was signed by the both clergies of the Roman Catholic and Russian Orthodox Churches, it would still be impossible to reunite them.

The Unity of the Church is an action of the Holy Spirit.

Our division was a result of our sinfulness, and Christians have failed to keep the saving commandment of unity. If the reunification happened, it would be a God's miracle, if we live to see it at all.

I am not sure I will witness this happening. Yet, maybe someone will live to see it, if the Lord sends us mercy and a certain new vision. However, nothing prevents us from praying that all Christians may live in peace.

We state that the world is strongly divided, and we reproach politicians, saying: you are unable to find a common language. But we should probably have a critical look at ourselves and ask: how come that we ourselves are unable to find a common language on the issues that people are concerned about?

What is going on in Syria, in Iraq today? I visited Iraq shortly before Saddam Hussein was overthrown. I visited Mosul and northern Iraq; I went to ancient monasteries of 4th century. They have preserved the great monastic tradition. Half a million Christians used to live there, and now there are only 150 000 Christians left in the whole Iraq. Where are the rest hundreds of thousands? Yet it is not only about killed or persecuted people, it is also about destroyed churches, ruined towns and villages. And it is happening before our very eyes.

It is well known that both the Russian Church and the Catholic Church have repeatedly raised these problems. However, their uncoordinated voices were somehow not taken as strongly as our joint Declaration is today. Now we hope that together we can draw the attention of political leaders and all the people of good will to this terrible phenomenon of our days.

Were you dissuaded from the meeting or not?

I was not, because no one knew about it. Only five people knew about the meeting, I will not voice their holy names. Why was it so? Because it is impossible to prepare such a meeting openly as there are too many opponents. I do not mean those of our dear and good Orthodox people, who believe that the meeting represents a danger in itself, but there are powerful forces that do not wish such encounter to happen. Therefore, it was necessary to prepare it quietly, in silence. And that is what we did.

Thank you.

Russia Today: Your Holiness, how important is your visit to precisely Latin America in these times so difficult for all Christians, especially to Brazil, the largest Catholic country in the world? And if you still have time, please tell us briefly about your meeting with Fidel Castro.

Shall we start with Castro? This is my third meeting with Fidel. I should say that when I was a young man, in the 1960s, we met Castro in what was Leningrad at that time. Castro, young and bearded, drove in an open "Chaika" together with Kosygin, and we were waving flags and shouting "Cuba – si, Yankees – no." There was such a slogan at that time. Of course, at that time I could hardly imagine that I would ever be able to meet him.He is a very strong person, an unconventional thinker, a real political leader, no matter how he is seen in North America, in Western Europe, in Latin America or in Russia. Regardless of these judgements, he is a really strong personality.

In total our meetings lasted for nearly 8 hours, with two 3-hour meetings and a 2-hour one now. He keeps a clear mind, he is a very attentive listener, he reacts to and analyses things properly, although he is – just imagine – 90 years old! It is quite phenomenal indeed. Having a conversation with him has always been very interesting for me, all the more so as he himself told me that after his father died, he and his brother Raul began to think what they should do with their enormous latifundium. Having been educated in a Jesuit college, they decided to do as the Gospel says: "Go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven" (cf. Matt 19:16).

Let us for a moment imagine ourselves in their place : they inherite an enormous fortune, they have the whole world before them, but they decide to give everything out to peasants. And they did it.

Afterwards they ask themselves: Is everything really so well in Cuba? And they realised that much needed to change. Yet as soon as they started with changes, some powerful economic forces, who had close relations with the strong northern neighbour, felt offended, and this posed a threat to the revolution. Castro told me during our first conversation, "So we went to Moscow because there was no other place to go, and they promised they would help us if we said that it was a socialist revolution." Well, they said [it was] "socialist" and started to learn Marxism, as Castro said. Yet the source is of Christian nature! Of course, Castro is a communist, a committed person, and his convictions do not change at all, but the sources are of Christian nature and in this sense he is of great interest to me .

It is also quite amazing that he allowed us to build a church and suggested that I decide where it should be constructed. I chose a site in the heart of Old Havana. And when I proposed to celebrate the Liturgy to be followed by a procession with the cross towards the place where the foundation stone was laid, he answered:

"No problem. There is a Franciscan monastery. Although now it is a museum and no services take place there, you may celebrate." When I came to this Franciscan monastery, I saw that the huge church was crowded and on the first bench were seated members of Central Committee of the Communist Party and ministers and they were not ashamed of crossing themselves.

Beforehand I had prepared two flags, Cuban and Russian. We formed a procession with the cross, the banners and the two flags. We marched out of this Franciscan monastery and walked through the central part of Havana. Nothing like this had ever happened in Cuba after the revolution. Thousands of people took part in the procession! Afterwards the Cubans built this church at their own expense – we just decorated it and arranged the interior.

Of course, even today some very important and interesting processes are under way in Cuba. I believe

that people there are searching for a right way to transform their society without any "shock therapy" or any painful fundamental changes, but by giving the private sector an increasingly significant role in the industry, agriculture and trade. In 2004 I did not see any grocery shops, where you could freely buy food for money, but now there are such shops. Little by little, all this will develop, I suppose.

Now Fidel is quite an old man, but his thoughts are very interesting. He is incredibly emotional when he speaks of something that touches him deeply, and very attentive when he listens to his interlocutor. So, for me it was a very good communicative experience.

Now I will reply to your first question. My first visit to Latin America took place in 1985, on the occasion of the meeting of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches organized in Buenos Aires. I was a member of the Committee.

Observing the life of people in Latin America, particularly its religious side, I noticed some common features and some similarity to the Russians and Russia in general. The following idea came up to my mind: this is almost Russia, but with a hot tropical climate. I mean the culture of everyday life and a kind of disregard of time. There is a word in Spanish – "mañana", which means tomorrow. So, if you are told that a meeting is to take place mañana, you would not know whether it will occur tomorrow, in two days or some time later. And people's emotional, religious level, too reminded me very much of that of our people.

Afterwards, while observing at that time, and especially later, some of the processes taking place in Western Europe and in the Northern Hemisphere as a whole, where religion has been gradually ousted from public life, where the number of believers has been falling, and the culture has been dechristianized, I have come to a conclusion that there are two regions that can give hope for a global revival of Christianity. These are Russia and Latin America. That is why, once enthroned, I wished so much to visit Latin America.

I am deeply convinced that this region has not only economic but also a great spiritual potential. Yet there is a danger that I felt today during a long conversation with the Archbishop of Rio de Janeiro. Here, some signs of de-Christianization are coming into sight as well. Firstly, there are many missionaries of all sorts from prosperous countries working actively here, as was the case in Russia in the1990s, thus weakening the position of the Catholic Church. Yet this is not the most important thing What is more important is that some political forces in Latin American countries tend to accept the current political models of the rich North, which ignore the religious tradition and separate the legislation from the moral human nature.

I have thought that there is also a considerable difference between us and them. We went through atheism, the denial of religion. However it was not a mere denial indeed, as, especially in the post-Revolution years, it was with atheism that Soviet people sincerely associated the building of an economically prosperous society of justice. Indeed, we (I mean the people) were building communism, and, at least up to the 1960-70s, people sincerely desired and strove after it. And no one will convince me that this is not true, because all of these Komsomol exploits could not have been accomplished without faith.

They must have had faith to go to explore the virgin soil, to build the Baikal-Amur Mainline, to do many other things. The enthusiasm was really enormous. Yet apart from that, let us also mention this: in the Soviet Union there was only one party and, therefore, all the economic, political and cultural potential, the Armed Forces, the security services, the sports – all was held in the same hands... along with the immense underground resources and the developed industry, and all for a single goal. However, even with such organisation, with so much effort monopolised to achieve the only goal , we failed to reach it, and everything collapsed. There are different ways to explain that, but the only one that I have is that you cannot achieve such goals without God, just as it proved impossible to build the Tower of Babel.

What is happening today in Western Europe, in North America, and can begin to happen in Latin America, is associated with a desire to build a fair, prosperous,

high-technology society, but that without God. This will not work out! And the experience of our people is very important. It is what I think and what I feel and maybe tomorrow I will tell this once again to my Latin American listeners: Look at our experience. It is not accidental that God has led our people through terrible trials and enormous losses.

Can it be said that all these sacrifices were in vain? I am deeply convinced that they were not, if only for the world to hear and learn about our unique experience. Today we are trying to build – not without difficulties or criticism – a society where religious faith could harmoniously coexist with education, technology, information, and modern lifestyle. And the task of the Church in Russia is to support this synthesis of things spiritual and material. I do not know how successful we are, perhaps not very successful as yet, but such are our intentions. That is what I have said and will continue to say in Latin America. That is why I wanted so much to visit the Latin American continent.

Your Holiness, may we come back to your meeting with Pope Francis. Will the joint work on key points of the Declaration be continued - the points on overcoming the persecution of Christians in the Middle East, de-Christianization of Europe, and on the situation in Ukraine? May be some joint commissions will be formed and some further meetings take place?

We have not planned any meetings so far, but I believe that the appropriate structures of the Roman Catholic Church and our Church will continue dialog in order to find solutions to the problems you have mentioned. I am not ready to say how it will look like technically, but humanity knows no other way but to meet, to exchange texts and thoughts and to elaborate a common position. God willing, it may be so. I hope it will.

Did you have a possibility to discuss some topics that have not been included in the Declaration?

We did not discuss topics as such, but apart from them there were arguments to make and joint reflection to engage in. I am not ready to reveal this part of our talks, although there is nothing secret in them. As I said, it was agreeable, at least to me, but I believe to my interlocutor as well to see that we really pursue the goals that we have declared. This is also true for the description of the extremely difficult situation in Syria. Why there is no trust between the parties?

Because each side understands that the declared goal, i. e. the fight against terrorism, is not the only goal and it is the existence of undeclared objectives that creates tension. In order to relieve this tension, it is necessary to agree what it is we are really fighting against in our joint efforts in Syria. So, at the level of our dialog with the Pope, there were no undeclared goals. We have worked in the frame of the objectives and the ideological paradigm reflected in the Declaration.

Rossiyskaya Gazeta: Do you feel that our concern over the Uniate actions in Ukraine did reach the Pope's heart?

You are probably aware of the reaction of the Greek Catholics and the Orthodox schismatics to this Declaration. One of the the schismatics compared this document with the Munich Agreement. And Uniates came out directly against the Pope, or at least against the Pope’s attitude, alleging that someone had deceived, misled him and that this Declaration had been written by certain two persons, which is untrue.

It is really a joint work and, let me make it clear, we put the finishing touches to the Declaration a few hours before the meeting. It is proved by the fact that we were editing the text until the last moment, all together.

This is a creative and constructive work of the two Churches, and of course, the document was signed at the highest level. I was very upset about the negative reaction in Ukraine, because the Declaration gives a chance for dialog with the Greek Catholics as well. If they act within the paradigm indicated by this Declaration, it will be the basis for normalizing the relations. Instead of rejecting it straight away and talking about "the aggressor Church", about the absence of a fratricidal war, instead of using political cliches, they should have thought and said: "Stop! So now we have a chance!" Yet it seems that now people there do not think that way.

I ask myself: is it possible to bring people together by persecution and violence? It is not! Indeed, even

the most radical nationalist forces in Ukraine are in favor of a conciliar Ukraine. What does the world 'conciliar' mean? It means one. Probably many of you are married. Is it possible to save your marriage through hatred, through an attempt of one of the spouses to get the upper hand over the other, through an open conflict, through stirring up hatred? Of course, the family will collapse. And that is how the human society collapses. If you wish to consolidate any group of people, you have to find the right language. You must take into account the interests of the one and the other, in order to ensure conditions acceptable to all.

And this is the only way to build a conciliar Ukraine. If you notice, this is the position taken by the Moscow Patriarchate, the Roman Catholic Church, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, whose flock live in north and south, in east and west. They are calling for peace, just as our monks did, who stood in Maidan. Do you remember this dramatic scene? They did not wave their fists or throw stones at someone. They were just standing and saying: "Peace be with you". And they remained standing, holding back the two forces, not allowing them to clash. This is the role of the Church, and in some sense it is also the role of a wise politician.

Therefore, I have a very optimistic vision of the future of Ukraine. Undoubtedly, the time of reconciliation will come. And it is highly important that the Greek Catholics take part in this reconciliation process, putting aside all these labeling and attempts to make someone abroad responsible for what is happening in their own country.

The common work for reconciliation is a task for all of us today. We are ready to participate in it precisely to the extent that our Ukrainian brothers find appropriate. If they say "we will do it without you", they will do it without us, as they wish. All these ideas can be found in the Declaration, and, of course, I was surprised to hear some unfair criticism from Kiev concerning this document.

Komsomolskaya Pravda: Your Holiness, during this trip you met with penguins. This was another significant meeting. Many people wondered why you went to Antarctica at all. So, I will ask you why? And how did you like the penguins? We noticed that they did not run away from you, like they did from us, and tried to make contact with you...

I would still like to begin not with penguins, but with the fact that our people in Antarctica have experienced some extremely difficult years. It is a miracle that our Antarctic expeditions have held out during the years following the disintegration of the Soviet Union. I was told by many people about this exploit. I am not going to describe dramatically everything that happened there, but it is a miracle that they managed to hold out in such conditions for so many years. Now the situation is naturally changing, and you have seen with your own eyes that our Bellingshausen station looks not bad at all, though there is still much to be done, of course.

Since my childhood, I have had a sort of relation with Antarctica, because I was friends with children of polar explorers. Somewhere near to what was called Leningrad, we used to rent a dacha together. So the atmosphere of the north and south poles, the stories about polar explorers have been familiar to me since childhood. However, that was not the reason of the visit, of course. The reason was that I received a very warm invitation: "inasmuch as you will be in Latin America, please come to us too." An Orthodox church has been built there, the only one in the whole Antarctica, in which regular services take place and priests live. And, of course, it would be unfair to be in relative but still proximity to Antarctica and not to come to see these heroic people, not to pray with them, not to support our clergymen there.

I experienced very warm feelings. Generally, you feel good about people in church, during a service, because the human soul opens up there and everything exists in a kind of metaphysical space. I felt very well among the explorers. I could see their response to everything, including my modest words. And when I learnt how they help one another regardless their nationality, how high is the level of their solidarity, and that there is no hatred, no rivalry, and as I have already mentioned, no arms, no military activity and no research aimed at the destruction of the other – I thought: this is the image of an ideal society! And when I saw the penguins approaching us, I remembered that there were no conflicts between animals and man in Paradise. It is, indeed, a kind of physical image of an ideal society where people, being different, live in peace, where the natural environment is protected as strictly as nowhere else on the globe, where people live in a complete harmony with the wonderful animals – the penguins. It is impossible to look at them without adoration.

Your Holiness, may I ask you about an episode that had happened just before we were to land in Antarctica? We were also in the cabin and could see the faces of some of our colleagues and passengers changing… Yet you did know what happened, did not you? Why did we have to go back and to change the plane?

I was probably the first to learn about it . It was immediately reported to me that a very dangerous accident had occurred: the cockpit windscreen had literally shattered into small pieces (it has two layers, and the first layer, which withstands the greatest impact, had shattered into small pieces). The pilot said that it was very dangerous and we needed to return immediately to Punta Arenas. Of course, I agreed and proposed to the pilot to fly at an altitude of 3-4 thousand meters, so that we would be able to survive in case of depressurization. We were flying at an altitude of 9 thousand meters when it happened, and we would have had little chance to get to the mainland. The pilot replied that there is an instruction whereby it is impossible to change the flight level sharply. But if you noticed, we were flying at a low altitude for a very long time over almost the entire Tierra del Fuego, so that if the second glass had blown up it would not have led to serious consequences. However, most of the flight over the Drake Passage was made at an altitude of 9 thousand meters, and it was certainly a risky flight.

And why didn’t you change your mind about flying altogether?

Well, it is not in my nature. And the point is not human stength – I just strongly believe in the will of God. Also we must remember that one who dedicates one’s life to Christ cannot not but believe in the afterlife, and if you do believe in this you perceive things differently than someone who does not believe in the afterlife, especially if one has something to leave in this life. So it does not beehive a believer to panic at all.

Official website of the Russian Orthodox Church

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