Metropolitan Hilarion: Orthodox and Catholics must learn to act as brothers and not as competitors

On February 12, 2016, the first ever meeting between the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia and the Pope, which had remained on the agenda of relations between the two Churches for 20 years, took place in Havana. What results were achieved? Will this meeting help solve the main problem of the two Churches? Should we be concerned about the rapprochement with Catholics? And should we expect the Pope's visit to Russia and the Patriarch's visit to Rome? Interviewed by Alexey Sosedov (Interfax-Religion), Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, answered to the following questions.

- Your Eminence, what do you think about the results of the meeting between Patriarch Kirill and Pope Francis?

- Much is being said about the fact that this was the first such meeting in the history, that it was unprecedented. Yet I think the subject-matter of the meeting is of greatest importance. Of course, it is a pleasure to see the Pope and the Patriarch together, talking in such a fraternal atmosphere, smiling at each other. However the most important matter is what the meeting is focused on, as it is fully reflected in the joint declaration signed by the Pope and the Patriarch. I believe that for a long time the declaration will be a beacon for Christians of both Orthodox and Catholic traditions.

The declaration makes some important statements about the Gospel as the common basis for the faithful of the East and the West and about the ways to fullfil the commandments of Gospel in the difficult modern situation. This declaration is a guide to action.

- Will this historic event help solve the main problem in relations between the two Churches, i. e. the activity of the Greek Catholics (Uniates) in Ukraine?

- A few days ago the media spread the reaction of the Archbishop of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church to the joint declaration of the Pope and the Patriarch. The reaction was very negative, very offensive to us, but also to the Pope. These statements show that the UGCC leaders are, so to speak, their usual selves. They are not ready to hear not only our Patriarch, but even the voice of their Pope.

They have their own politicised agenda, their own patrons whose orders they fulfill, and even the Pope is of no authority for them.

- What joint steps are needed now to bring Uniates to reason? Should we expect a comission of the Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Churches to be established?

- The idea of creation of some kind of commission to solve the problem of the Union does exist. But the specific parameters of this commission are difficult to imagine, especially while taking in consideration the actual state of mind of the UGCC leaders.

In the early 1990s a quadripartite commission was established in order to solve some precise, practical problems of coexistence between the Orthodox and the Greek Catholics in Western Ukraine. But the Greek Catholics left the commission on unilateral basis. They did not want to be part of it. I believe that it is due to the fact that they are totally reluctant to follow the path which the Pope and the Patriarch have marked out in their joint declaration.

The way that the Pope and the Patriarch offer, is a way of cooperation in the areas in which it is

possible. It is a way of rejection of competition and of establishment of brotherly relations. The Greek Catholics do not need that at all. Their rhetoric is aggressive, hostile, cheeky, and it stands in a sharp contrast not only to the declaration's content, but even to its style, to its pastoral message, to the reconciling spirit that emanates from it.

- Journalists are particularly concerned about the following: should we expect the Pope's visit to Russia?

- This topic was not discussed at the meeting between the Pope and the Patriarch. It may concern everyone, but I did not get an impression that the Pope was concerned about it. At least, it was not mentionned during the encounter. Currently the Pope's visit to Moscow or the Patriarch's visit to Rome are not being discussed.

What is being discussed is that cooperation should be closer, mutual understanding should be deeper, an attempt to overcome as soon as possible the negativity that has been accumulated in the relations between the Orthodox and the Catholics should be made and we should also work to achieve the convergence of minds and hearts.

Later, time will tell us how to act. I think that once the way for a next meeting will be paved, we will decide when and where to organise it.

- Are the two Churches planning to develop a pilgrimage exchange?

- During the meeting between the Pope and the Patriarch it was said that we should be more open to each other in terms of pilgrimage. For example, the relics of St. Nicholas in Bari, in Italy, attract a huge stream of Orthodox pilgrims every day. And Orthodox shrines are also attended by Catholic pilgrims. Yet we are able to intensify these two streams, because it is very important that people meet each other and have access to the holy sites located in other Churches' lands.

- Is it possible to temporary bring to Russia the relics of Apostles Peter and Paul from Rome and those of St. Jacob from Spain?

- I believe it is quite possible. And I suppose that if the relics of Saints held by Catholics and revered in our Church are brought to Russia, our believers will take it with a great enthusiasm. And of course, a reverse movement is possible. That means, the shrines held by the Russian Orthodox Church may for some time be brought to the West in order to give an opportunity to the faithful of the Catholic Church to worship them.

- Could it happen in the near future?

- I hope that the first exchange of sanctuaries may happen in the course of this year.

- How are the Russian Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Churches going to defend the traditional moral values now?

- As far as protection of the traditional moral values is concerned, we hold absolutely together with the Catholic Church. We perceive marriage as a union between a man and a woman for the birth and upbringing of children. We believe it is necessary to protect human life from conception to natural death. We are opposed to abortion. And some very strong statements were made in the joint declaration in support of life and of right to live that each person enjoys. I believe that we will cooperate more actively in these areas.

- Recently we learned that nuncio Ivan Jurkovic had been reappointed from Moscow to Geneva. Is it related to the meeting between the Patriarch and the Pope? Is it known who will be the next nuncio?

- We do not know who will be the next nuncio. I learned it from the media that Archbishop Ivan Jurkovic had been appointed to Geneva. The appointment of nuncios is an internal matter of the Vatican, particularly of the Vatican as a state. The Apostolic nuncio is an ambassador of the Vatican in other states. And in this regard the appointment of nuncios is not a matter of inter-church relations.

In no case this appointment should be taken as a result of our discontent with the nuncio. On the contrary, we had a very good relationship with Ivan Jurkovic, as well as with his predecessor. We do not have any complaints about him. We are grateful to him for a productive collaboration. I believe that his reappointment is only due to the rhythm of replacement of nuncios and usually they are replaced after four years on duty. It is like with other ambassadors. Just a day or two prior to our departure to Havana, nuncio Ivan Jurkovic was on my television program. We had a very good conversation with him. Indeed, I had heard that his reappointment to somewhere was under preparation, but I had no opportunity to ask him about it.

- Some Orthodox fear the rapprochement with the Catholics. They are concerned that there may be a complete fusion of the Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Churches. What would you say to these people?

- First of all, I would advise them to read carefully the declaration of the Pope and the Patriarch. It indicates the subjects of the conversation. There was no attempt of a doctrinal rapprochement and even no discussion on any dogmatic or theological issues. Currently this discussion is absolutely off the agenda. The declaration opens with a statement that a loss of unity commanded by God is opposed to Christ's commandment voiced in His last high-priestly prayer: "May they all be one." Unfortunately, Christians are not able to maintain this unity. Christians of East and West are divided and do not celebrate the Eucharist together.

Yet now it is not question of overcoming this division, but of learning to live and to act in this world not as competitors, but as brothers, to work together in order to protect our common values, to jointly preach the Gospel and to reveal the Divine Truth to people. And this is what we can do together today. I appreciated the words of Raul Castro pronounced during his meeting with Patriarch Kirill, after the Patriarch had told him about then forthcoming encounter with the Pope. President Raul recalled an adage telling that any journey, even the longest one, starts with a first step. This first step is made. Now I hope that together the faithful of the two traditions will stand up for all that we have in common without any compromise with their conscience and without accepting any doctrinal compromise.

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