Metropolitan Hilarion: possibility of convening Pan-Orthodox Council raises doubts

At the request of the Synodal Department for Church-Society and Media Relations, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations, gave a brief summary of some events in 2015, and shared his expectations for the coming year.

– Your Eminence, the celebrations marking the millennium of the demise of the Holy Prince Vladimir Equal-to-the-Apostles were held throughout 2015. In compliance with the decision of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of 20 January 2014, an organizing committee of the Russian Orthodox Church was established to prepare the celebrations. At the session held on 24 December 2015, the Holy Synod expressed its appreciation to you and to all those who were actively involved in the preparation and carrying out of the festive events. What can you say about the jubilee year of St Vladimir?

– The Organizing Committee set up with the blessing of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia had a lot of work to do. Among the Committee's members were representatives of church institutions from Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine. It is gratifying that our Ukrainian brothers managed to take part in the work of the Committee and made a considerable contribution to developing the programme of the events, which helped make the celebration Church-wide.

In 2015 His Holiness Patriarch Kirill visited Belarus where the large-scale celebrations in honour of the Holy Prince Vladimir took place. Among those who attended them was a delegation of the Polish Orthodox Church.

In Moscow, delegations of all Local Orthodox Churches took part in the celebrations held on July 26-28. His Holiness Patriarch Kirill consecrated a reconstructed Chapel of the Holy Prince Vladimir Equal-to-the-Apostles at the Moscow Diocesan House, and on July 28, the feast day, officiated at the Divine Liturgy at the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in concelebration with hierarchs and clergy of the Moscow Patriarchate and the guests from the Local Orthodox Churches.

A traditional thanksgiving was said at the monument to the Holy Prince on St Vladimir's Hill in Kiev on July 27, followed by a procession with the cross to the Kievan Laura of the Caves. Thousands of people joined the procession. At the Laura, His Beatitude Metropolitan Onufry of Kiev and All Ukraine celebrated the All-Night Vigil, and on the feast day officiated at the Divine Liturgy at the Cathedral of the

Dormition. Concelebrating with him were hierarchs of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and the guests – hierarchs of the Romanian, Bulgarian, Polish Orthodox Churches and of the Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia.

On the commemoration day of St Vladimir, the Divine Liturgy was celebrated at the place of his baptism, at St Vladimir's Cathedral in Chersonese, Crimea. Preceding the service was a procession with the cross which went along the streets of Sevastopol to the cathedral. The participants carried the relics of the Holy Prince Vladimir.

With the blessing of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, permanent members of the Holy Synod led the jubilee celebrations in various metropolias of the Russian Orthodox Church. I visited the metropolias of Priamurye, Primorye, and Tatarstan.

Throughout the whole jubilee year, over thirteen thousand different events, such as processions with the cross, Divine Services, forums, lectures and school contests, were held in the dioceses of the Russian Orthodox Church. Theological schools were involved in the organization of the conferences dedicated to Prince Vladimir and his role in the choice of civilization made by the Eastern Slavs. A three-day International Research and Application Conference entitled "Prince Vladimir. The Choice of Civilization," was held at Ss Cyril and Methodius Theological Institute of Postgraduate Studies which I head. Taking part in the conference were leading experts in the Holy Prince Vladimir's heritage from Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and from far abroad countries. His Holiness Patriarch Kirill and Mr. Sergey Naryshkin, chairman of the State Duma, took part in its opening.

In 2015, the holy relics of Prince Vladimir Equal-to-the-Apostles were brought to eighty cities in various dioceses of the Russian Orthodox Church in Central Russia, the Volga region, Kuban, Siberia, Far East, and regional centres in Belarus. Over eight hundred and fifty thousand people were able to venerate the shrine during this unprecedented event.

As part of the celebrations, hierarchs in various dioceses of the Russian Orthodox Church laid the foundation stones and consecrated some fifty churches and chapels dedicated to St Vladimir; three monuments were erected. On November 3, His Holiness Patriarch Kirill blessed the foundation stone of the monument to Prince Vladimir at the Borovitskaya Square in Moscow.

I would like to note that the jubilee celebrations took part not only within the canonical territory of the Russian Orthodox Church. The dioceses and stavropegic parishes abroad organized the Divine Services and festive events on the commemoration day of the Holy Prince Vladimir. In 2015, the Moscow Patriarchate's Administration for Institutions Abroad, in cooperation with the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad and International

Humanitarian Cooperation (Rossotrudnichestvo), organized about one hundred and fifty events in fifty-four countries, where Russian people reside, and some fifty events in the CIS and Baltic states.

The Polish Orthodox Church and the Orthodox Church in America also carried out special celebrations in commemoration of the Holy Prince Vladimir.

As His Holiness Patriarch Kirill said at the session of the Holy Synod on December 24, thanks to all these efforts, it is as if the Holy Prince has once again come to his people, and we have felt his presence in our life.

– What is, in your opinion, the religious situation in Ukraine? What do you think about the current situation of the faithful of the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church?

– Apart from the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which enjoys broad rights of self-governance within the Moscow Patriarchate and is recognized by all Local Orthodox Churches, there are several unrecognized schismatic denominations acting in Ukraine. Since the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church is not involved in the civil conflict and is acting as a peacemaker, it is being subjected to attacks from radical political forces in Ukraine. The local schismatics, the so called “Kiev Patriarchate,” take advantage of it and, enjoying the support of the radicals, take away churches from Orthodox Christians in Ukraine. Forging ownership documents and driving out our faithful from their churches, they claim that their actions are in fact “voluntary transfers” of the Orthodox congregations into the schism. The local radical nationalists and sometimes the local authorities support this process.

A recent incident in the Ptichya village, Rovno Region, provoked a particularly strong response. There, the faithful of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, two priests and several women, were blocked in their church by the schismatics and spent there several days with no food or water. When Patriarch Irinej of Serbia learned about it, he wrote a letter to His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia and to Metropolitan Onufry of Kiev and All Ukraine, expressing his strong condemnation of the schismatics’ outrageous actions.

The situation in the Ptichya village has calmed down by now; they try to persuade the schismatics to build their own church instead of seizing the one that does not belong to them.

So far, the schismatics have seized over thirty churches in all, and the situation remains very alarming. It is important not to allow the civil confrontation, which has split the country, to turn into an interconfessional conflict with unpredictable consequences.

– The Department for External Church Relations is again in charge of interfaith dialogue .

What does it mean for you?

– After the DECR no longer had the interfaith dialogue in its competence, our Department worked actively to promote the dialogue with Islam and other religions in foreign countries. At the same time, we maintained good relations with representatives of traditional religions in Russia. I visited Tatarstan several times, where I met with representatives of Islam. I also held regular meetings with leaders of Islam and Judaism in Moscow. In 2013 the Sector for Interreligious Contacts was established at the DECR. When necessary, the Sector maintained relationships not only with foreign, but also with Russian Islamic and Judaic communities. At times this created unnecessary duality that interfered with our work. The leaders of other religions often applied to our Department, and we had to forward their letters to another Synodal structure, sometimes making them feel that they were not welcome.

The Interreligious Council of Russia was established in 1998 as a public body consisting of representatives of the four leading religious traditions in Russia, that is, Orthodoxy, Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism. When the Council was set up, one of its chairs was the DECR chairman, now His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia. Today we have returned to the initial practice, and again the head of the Department for External Church Relations represents the Church at the Interreligious Council of Russia.

The presidium of the Council also includes Berel Lazar, Chief Rabbi of Russia; Adolf Shayevich, Chief Rabbi of Russia; Zinovy Kogan, Chief Rabbi of Moscow; Shaykh al-Islam Talgat-Hazrat Tajuddin, Supreme Mufti, chairman of the Central Russia Muslim Board; Mufti Sheikh Ravil Gainutdin, chairman of the Russian Council of Muftis (now Central Muslim Spiritual Board of Russia); Mufti Ismail Berdiev, chairman of the Coordination Centre of Muslims of the North Caucasus; and Pandito Hambo Lama Damba Ayusheyev, head of the Buddhist traditional Sangha of Russia.

I have known the members of the Interreligious Council for many years; it is difficult to overestimate their work aimed at upholding interreligious peace in Russia. I am glad that at this challenging time, when much remains to be done for preserving interreligious stability in our country, I will be able to work in even closer contact with them.

– Your Eminence, what are the plans for His Holiness Patriarch Kirill's trips abroad in the nearest future?

– At its session held on 24 December 2015, the Holy Synod submitted to the consideration of the Bishops' Council of the Russian Orthodox Church an issue of canonizing Archbishop Seraphim (Sobolev) of Boguchary, a prominent figure of the church émigré community who had been buried in the crypt of the Russian church in Sofia. Provided that the canonization takes place, His Holiness might visit

the capital of Bulgaria on 26 February 2016, the day of the blessed demise of Archbishop Seraphim, to take part, together with the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, in the celebrations which will mark the glorification of the new saint. His Holiness Patriarch Neofit of Bulgaria has already sent an invitation letter to His Holiness Patriarch Kirill, in which he noted that the whole Bulgarian Orthodox Church was looking forward to the canonization of Archbishop Seraphim who enjoys the nation-wide veneration.

The millennium of the Russian presence on Mount Athos is a jubilee of particular importance for the Russian Orthodox Church. The celebrations will take place both in Russia and on the Holy Mountain. His Holiness Patriarch Kirill is expected to visit Athos on this occasion.

The Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church received several invitations from the leadership of Cuba to visit that country. Raúl Castro, the leader of Cuba, was the first head of a foreign state to meet with His Holiness Patriarch Kirill after his enthronement. The last time the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church had a private talk with Mr. Castro was on May 8, 2015. God willing, His Holiness Patriarch Kirill's visit to the Island of Freedom will take place in February 2016 and will become an important step on the way of strengthening the relations between the Russian Church and the Cuban authorities, as well as between the people of the two countries. These relations have traditionally been of friendly nature.

In 2008 His Holiness, then the chairman of the Department for External Church Relations, visited Cuba and met with the country's leadership and public figures. Yet, it will be his first Primatial visit to that country.

There are plans for His Holiness Patriarch Kirill's other overseas trips as well, but their schedule and dates need to be specified.

– And the last question, Vladyka. What are the prospects of convening the Pan-Orthodox Council?

– As is well-known, in 2014 the Primates of the Local Orthodox Churches resolved to convene the Pan-Orthodox Council in Constantinople, now Istanbul, in 2016, having made a significant stipulation, "unless something unexpected occurs." A considerable part of the Council's draft documents was supposed to be edited and in some cases even rewritten during the remaining two years, since many of those draft documents, drawn up some thirty years ago, have already lost their relevance.

Regrettably, the work for revising the documents is making a slow progress. As a result, out of eight topics which were supposed to be considered by the Council, only three have been agreed upon by now; the work on the other documents has not been completed. As for such an important topic for the

canonical legal understanding as a procedure of proclaiming autocephaly, it has been removed from the agenda altogether, though the main and substantial part of the document on this topic was approved long ago.

So far, the Local Churches have not reached common understanding of the rules under which the Pan-Orthodox Council should operate, and of its regulations. The Special Inter-Orthodox Committee which recently met for discussing these issues had to adjourn the meeting, having failed to reach the consensus.

Many of the questions concerning the preparation of the Council, which His Holiness Patriarch Kirill repeatedly raised in his letters to His Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew in the past year, remain unanswered.

Besides, the very possibility of convening the Pan-Orthodox Council raises doubts at a time when some of the Orthodox Churches live in the situation of unsettled conflict, and when the Primate of the Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia has not been recognized in his status by a number of the Orthodox Churches, say nothing of the extremely unstable political situation in the world.

At the same time I would like to emphasize that the Russian Orthodox Church has always taken and continues to take an active part in the Pre-Council process in spite of obvious difficulties in the preparation of the Council. As for the exact dates of the Council, I deem it too early to speak about it.

DECR Communication Service

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