Metropolitan Hilarion: Orthodoxy in China is part of the cultural tradition

On June 6, 2015, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk as anchorman of the Church and the World talk-show at the Russia-24 TV network hosted Mr. Boris Titov, Presidential Commissioner for the Rights of Enterprisers and chairman of the Russian-Chinese Peace, Friendship and Development Committee.

Metropolitan Hilarion: Good afternoon, dear brothers and sisters. You are tuned to the Church and the World talk-show. Today we will speak about cooperation between Russia and China, including in the religious sphere. My guest today is the Presidential Commissioner for the Rights of Enterprisers and chairman of the Russian-Chinese Peace, Friendship and Development Committee, Boris Titov. Good afternoon, Boris Yuryevich.

Boris Titov: Good afternoon, Your Eminence,

Yes, along with my primary duties as Commissioner for the Rights of Enterprisers, the president has charged me with developing relations between the peoples of Russia and China as very important for our two countries. In this sense, our Committee for Peace, Friendship and Development is an uncommon institution. It aims at developing relations between nations but at the same time the Committee membership is formed by the leaders of the two countries, which gives it a high status.

Today, the inter-state relations have reached a high level; the trade between the two countries is growing and as are our common investment projects. The leaders of the two countries, Russia and China, are on friendly terms. There are very close are relations between the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and other state institutions. But there is still a misunderstanding in society, between people, and there is a lack of similar friendly relations.

Of course, there is a difference felt in the history and culture of the two countries. Our task today is to find ways for drawing people closer together so that they may have a better knowledge of each other and the barriers, which are still there, may be removed. Today we are building our work in many areas: we have a business council of enterprisers and a council for culture. We pay attention to various projects in filmmaking, theatre, opera, museums, arts and healthcare projects. Of course, our relations in the religious sphere are very important for us as well because it is a process of spiritual development, which took the Russian and Chinese nations to different paths. Nevertheless, there are traditions of Orthodoxy in China, and we too are trying to concentrate our efforts in this area.

Metropolitan Hilarion: The cooperation between Russia and China especially in the sphere of culture has already brought forth certain fruits. Some years ago, I happened to attend the Shanghai Film Festival, in which Pavel Lungin's film 'A Conductor' based on my music won a prize. I could see the interest which Chinese viewers showed in our film. This cultural exchange is of great importance now, for it helps overcome barriers including psychological, which surely exist between the two nations.

Boris Titov: Yes. You are aware that our nations were very close both in the pre-war and post-war years. I believe each Chinese of that generation knows very many Russian songs and films. Generally, the older generation is very close to the Russian culture of that time. The younger generation knows less, of course. Therefore, such contemporary films as 'A Conductor' and others are very important, for instance, the three Russian films which were presented at the recent film festival in Beijing. I believe they will show well in cinemas. Quite recently in China, the film 'Stalingrad' has become very popular. All these new projects and new contacts should restore the attitude the Chinese used to have towards Russian culture before.

And we, too, must know more about the Chinese culture. Unfortunately, people in Russia have much poorer knowledge of it than it is desirable, though the Chinese culture is rich in old traditions rooted deep in history. The Chinese cherish these traditions: their peacefulness, their friendliness, their respect for the elders – all these are millennia-old cultural traditions genetically laid in them.

Metropolitan Hilarion: Many people of the older generation remember the time when the Soviet state paid special attention to the development of relations with China. It was in the beginning of the 'Cultural Revolution'. They remember the slogan 'Stalin and Mao are brothers forever'. But it was not the first attempt at rapprochement. Of course, less known but still registered in historical sources is the attempt of Imperial Russia to come to closer relations with China by building a Chinese Eastern Railway. This project was very significant at that time, for it enabled Russians to travel to China and Chinese people to Russia. When the revolution broke out in 1917, it was this railway that hundreds of thousands of Russians took to flee to China and to found their communities there.

However, even less known page in the history of Russian-Chinese relations is the history of Orthodoxy in China. Actually, this history is 330 year-old now. All began with the Chinese capturing the Russian frontier fortress 'Albazin' in 1685 and taking to captivity hundreds of Albazin Cossacks with a Russian priest among them. Precisely from that moment this Russian community began living its own life in Beijing. They did not return to Russia married Chinese women and in every new generation there was less and less Russian blood in their descendants, while Orthodoxy was preserved. The descendants of those Albazians still live in China, and our Church takes pastoral care of them. This responsibility has been placed on me by His Holiness the Patriarch and the Holy Synod.

Boris Titov: I know that in our time a whole series of scientific studies have been made into the history of the Russian Orthodox Church in China. Today, churches have been restored, for instance, a church not far from Shanghai, which will soon begin functioning. Another church has been restored in the territory of the Russian embassy in Beijing.

But there are a few more projects we would like to engage in. Indeed, a large group of Russian people also lived in Harbin. They also used to have their own church, St. Sophia's, which stands today in Harbin's central square. Now Harbin has turned from a small town with only a few thousand people into a city with a population of over 10 millions, and still the Russian Orthodox church stands as before in the central square as historical memory of the Russian diaspora which used to live in Harbin and memory of the Chinese Easter Railroad. Unfortunately, the church does not function. There is an exhibition in it which is visited by an enormous number of Chinese.

Our idea is to make this church function again, so that a great number of the Orthodox could come for services. And the exhibition can be moved to one of the historical facilities nearby, which are also associated with the Russian diaspora in Harbin. It is one of the projects that we would like to suggest to the Chinese side. We hope for their understanding.

Metropolitan Hilarion: For a number of years we have conducted official dialogue with the People's Republic of China's State Directorate for Religious Affairs. This dialogue started as far back as under my predecessor as Chairman of the Department for External Church Relations, now His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, who actually initiated it. As the DECR chairman, he visited China on several occasions and not long ago visited China already as Patriarch. It was an historic visit: for the first time in history the Patriarch of Moscow set foot on the Chinese land and for the first time in the history of Communist China the supreme leader of the People's Republic of China met with a religious leader of this rank.

Certainly, that visit gave a new impetus to the development of our relations, for we came to feel at once that problems, which had existed for several years, began to be solved or we began finding some prospects for a solution through common efforts. It is true not only for the historic places of Orthodox presence, such as Beijing, Shanghai and Harbin.

In Harbin, as you have reminded me, there is our church. There is also a still functioning church of the Protecting Veil. In total, out of over 20 Russian churches only 5 have survived. Of course, they are in different degrees of preservation and are used for different purposes. One of them is functioning and it has a Chinese priest he leads the church community.

Not long ago I happened to visit a Chinese autonomous region called Inner Mongolia bordering on Russia and Mongolia. There are several settlements with living descendants of Russian people who came there as far back as the 19th century. I talked to these people. They all have preserved the Orthodox faith. For them a church has been built and consecrated instead of those destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. I celebrated in it and was moved by the people's excellent knowledge of Orthodox traditions of how to cross themselves, how to put candles and kiss an icon. All this has stayed in them in

spite of the fact that the liturgy had not been celebrated there for many years. Many of them still have a good command of Russian. And those who do not speak Russian and bear Chinese names do know their Russian names given them at baptism. They use their diminutives, like Pasha for Pavel or Manya for Maria. All this is very interesting.

Boris Titov: Indeed, on China's map there are many points where Russia and Orthodoxy are still remembered. Our task is to continue developing this memory, creating new traditions including in the area of spiritual exchange between the two countries.

I should say that China has its own spiritual life. In this sense China is a very unusual country. There are three main religions observed by an absolute majority of the Chinese. First of all, it is Confucianism, then Daoism and then Buddhism. Confucianism is generally a theory of behaviour, a theory of the development of a society. The Chinese say that Confucianism is the religion of those who dedicated themselves to the service of ultimate ideals, the service of people and search for the truth. If we speak of Daoism, it is a religion for educated and high-ranking people, If we speak of Buddhism, it is a religion for more ordinary people. You see, they have everything very clear and pragmatic. Religion also helps them to live by spiritual values and to serve their society. That is why we should develop these areas in our common work.

Metropolitan Hilarion: If we speak of Christianity, it is a religion traditional for China as well. Not only because monks and bishops of the Assyrian Church of the East carried out their mission in China in the first millennium and there were also Catholic missionaries, but also because Orthodoxy has been developing in the territory of China for 330 years now. Orthodoxy is not only a Russian faith though, which is very important. Yes, Orthodoxy really appeared in China thanks to Russians, war prisoners at that, not missionaries. But already under Peter I a Russian Orthodox Mission was sent to China for pastoral care and it had existed right up to the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. The book I am holding, entitled 'Orthodoxy in China', describes the history of Orthodox spiritual presence in the Chinese land. And we show that Orthodoxy that came to China with captive Albazin Cossacks acquired a really Chinese national character becoming part of the cultural tradition of the country. The liturgy was translated into Chinese. The priests were Chinese. There are still elderly Chinese priests living there (they are over 90). They were ordained even before the Cultural Revolution. And now we see new Chinese clergy coming…

Boris Titov: … who have to be trained in a seminary. They can be invited for studies in Russia. Perhaps, as part of the work you carry out it has already been done?

Metropolitan Hilarion: Quite right. We invite them. They are trained in our Church to come back and serve in accordance with Chinese traditions and Chinese law.

The tragic history of the Chinese Church which was subjected in the 60s and 70s to severe persecution, like we were in the 20s and 30s, is part of the history of China, on one hand, and that of our church history, on the other. Our task today is to look not in the past but in the future. We should preserve what we have inherited from our ancestors, but what is most important, we must take care of those for whom Orthodoxy has become their native faith. That is why I would like to thank you for your cooperation in this area, to wish successes to your Committee and to express hope for a continuation of our common efforts.

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