Metropolitan Hilarion: Dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church should be continued

On 25 October 2014, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, host of 'The Church and the World' talk-show on Vesti-24 TV-channel, talked with Mr. Matvei Popov, broadcast news analyst and religious scholar.

Metropolitan Hilarion: Good afternoon, dear brothers and sisters! You are watching 'The Church and the World' talk-shaw. Today we will talk about our relationships with the Catholic Church with our guest, Matvei Popov, broadcast news analyst and religious scholar. Good afternoon, Matvei!

Matvei Popov: Good afternoon, Vladyka, you have recently returned from the Vatican. You were there during the Extraordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops of the Roman Catholic Church dedicated to the problems of the family. What was the purpose of your visit?

Metropolitan Hilarion: The Synod of Bishops convenes once in several years. It is a consultative body under the Pope of Rome. Traditionally invited to the Synod are the so-called fraternal delegates, i.e., delegates of the non-Catholic Churches.

The problem of the family, discussed at the Assembly, is a topical one for the Catholic Church today. The processes which are going on in the legislation of the Western world, in the countries where the Catholic Church has her greatest influence, stand in a radical contrast with the Church's views on the family. It concerns, of course, the legalization of various non-traditional forms of the family and, first and foremost, same-sex unions.

Besides, the Catholic Church experiences serious problems with those faithful who, for instance, have divorced and want to marry again. However, the teaching of the Catholic Church does not virtually imply such possibility. Millions of people who had to divorce by the force of different circumstances neither have the right to remarry nor are even allowed to partake of the Holy Communion.

This topic aroused heated disputes, since it appeared that the bishops who gathered for the Synod had very different views on it. I deemed it important to share with the Catholic brothers our Orthodox experience, because we have common teaching on marriage. It is neither Orthodox nor Catholic teaching – it is the teaching of Christ Himself and the apostles. We insist that there should be only one marriage and that spouses should be faithful to each other. However, when it comes to real situations in which people find themselves, we, as pastors, act in different ways.

The Catholic Christians, in my opinion, take a very rigoristic, legalistic approach: in order to receive the Church's recognition of the marriage annulment, people need to go through the church tribunal process. It is possible to receive such recognition only if the Church, after carrying out an investigation, will proclaim not just that the marriage broke down, but that it was illegal and erroneous from the very beginning. As far as I know, only a small percentage of Catholics agree to undergo such procedure.

We, Orthodox, have another view on marriage. The ideal, of course, remains, but in practice different situations arise. In case of divorce we always draw a distinction between the guilty party and the innocent one. If, for example, man beats his wife and children, then such marriage poses a threat to them and divorce becomes not only a justifiable, but even an inevitable option. The Church supports it and gives her blessing to the innocent party to marry again.

Matvei Popov: The Synod's work on formulating the attitude of the Roman Catholic Church to same-sex unions drew special attention of the mass media. Several working groups were set up which tried to express this attitude in different languages. No doubt, the wordings remained Christian and conservative. If we try to express them in one general formula we will say that a Christian must remain meek and loving; sin is sin, but mercy can be showed to those who repent. At the same time, the very fact that such problem as same-sex unions appeared on the agenda of the Synod made a number of the mass media say that the Catholic Church is preparing to soften her attitude to the problem.

Vladyka, you met with the participants in the Synod. Is any one of them ready to change his views?

Metropolitan Hilarion: I was not present at the sessions during all two weeks, but did not miss an important, to my mind, moment when the reports of different working groups, the English, the French, the Italian, and the Spanish ones, were being read out. Presented were eight reports, two from each language group, and they showed how far different opinions and approaches were. The difference is conditional to a large extent on a cultural context: on which country a certain bishop comes from and where he performs his ministry. Indeed, the approach that you call conservative prevailed, though the voices of liberal-minded bishops who advocated the relaxation of church discipline were distinctly audible.

As far as I know, almost no one spoke in support of same-sex unions, and those who advocated the relaxation spoke about divorces and the possibility for people, who had divorced through no fault of their own, to remarry, as well as about the possibility for them to partake of the Holy Communion. That topic aroused a really serious controversy.

As for the attitude to same-sex unions, I think there were no serious controversies, because the teaching

of the Church on that issue is unambiguous. The Church cannot change what is considered a sin from the perspective of Christian morality and declare it a normal behavior. Yet, again, the pastoral practice gives a Christian pastor rather ample opportunities. For example, in the Basis of the Social Concept, an official document adopted by the Russian Orthodox Church in 2000, we draw a distinction between homosexual inclinations and homosexual conduct. We say that the conduct is a sinful factor, as opposed to inclinations which are not sinful per se. A person who behaves in an unseemly manner is called to repentance. The Church accepts repentance; a human being can lament over any sin and receive forgiveness.

Matvei Popov: During your visit, you twice raised the issue of the Greek Catholics. While speaking to the participants in the Synod, you asked them to call the Ukrainian Greek Catholic community to distance itself from the conflict in Ukraine and not to split up the Christian community any further. Later, you raised the same issue during your meeting with Pope Francis. Can you say that the Vatican has heard your position?

Metropolitan Hilarion: I think that the Vatican has heard it. Yet, another matter is whether anything will change in our relations. Regrettably, we see the situation in which an official Vatican is carrying out the dialogue with us on different levels: on the theological one and on that of discussing certain problems, as it was at the Synod of Bishops.

However, there is still an acute tension in the countries where the Orthodox live side by side with the Greek Catholics. It happens largely because of the involvement of the Greek Catholics in political agenda. They take certain political positions and support one of the parties in a civil confrontation.

We cannot agree with that. The Church must be above politics and support people, regardless of their political views. That is the position of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. During all these horrible and tragic months, beginning with clashes in Maidan in January and during the developments in Eastern Ukraine, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church has not supported any party. Among the faithful of our Church there are people who have found themselves on both sides of the barricades. We would like all religious communities in Ukraine to adhere to this position because it alone can reconcile people. Any other position only adds fuel to the fire, divides people and, therefore, does not contribute to the settlement of the severe conflict.

We have another claim to the Greek Catholics, to which, actually, the head of the Greek Catholic Church gave a response immediately after my address. I am satisfied with this answer. The matter is that during last several months, the Greek Catholics have repeatedly supported schismatics and now, in fact, are fighting against a canonical Church. The head of the Greek Catholic Church has been seen several times in the company of the excommunicated head of the so-called Kiev Patriarchate, Filaret

(Denisenko). They even went to America together and visited offices of the U.S. Department of State.

From our point of view, such close association of an official Catholic structure, the Greek Catholic Church, with a schismatic structure contradicts, at least, the protocol of inter-Church relations maintained during many decades. We do not come in contact with those whom the other side considers schismatics. Archbishop Svyatoslav (Shevchuk) gave his response to it the day after I had delivered my address. He said that the Greek Catholic Church recognized the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate as the only canonical Orthodox structure in Ukraine and that the Greek Catholics cooperated with the schismatics in a civil sphere and within the framework of the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches which unites various Ukrainian church organizations.

Matvei Popov: Please, tell us the purpose of your meeting with Pope Benedict. Does he regret his decision to retire?

Metropolitan Hilarion: I did not ask him about it. He is 87 years old. He walks badly, but has an excellent memory. I was glad that in spite of his advanced age and some physical infirmity he keeps a clear head. He says that he spends most of his time in prayer.

I had an opportunity to see where and how he lives. It is a rather modest small house in the Vatican, on a hill, with a wonderful view. By the way, one can clearly see from there our Orthodox Church of St Catherine.

I wanted to visit Pope Benedict, because I had met with him three times before his retirement and I hold him in great respect as a theologian. I have recently read his book ‘Jesus of Nazareth,’ which seems very significant for a contemporary Western reader. By visiting Pope Benedict, I also wanted to express my respect to him. I certainly did not ask him any delicate questions about his retirement.

The issues which we used to talk about with Pope Benedict, such as church affairs, the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue, and today’s problems, I discussed with Pope Francis this time. I have to say that the Pope showed understanding to what I had to say.

Matvei Popov: What is your impression of the meeting with Pope Francis? In what ways was that meeting different from the previous ones?

Metropolitan Hilarion: Our every meeting is a renewal of the previous conversation. When I first met Pope Francis, the day after his enthronement, I was pleased to see that he was a competent man. For there were some concerns, as elected to the Pontifical Throne was a man from the so-called ‘Third World,’ South America, who would neither have a handle on a situation nor be well informed. In truth, he

is very well informed on various issues, including such delicate ones as our relationships with the Greek Catholics. That impression only deepened during our last meeting.

Of course, we will not be able to resolve all issues at once. Yet, I believe that the dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church should be continued, because such meetings give us an opportunity to state our position and hear a response. I believe that Pope Francis is inclined to continue the dialogue with the Orthodox Church. He expressed his regret over the developments taking place in Ukraine today. Certainly, it is necessary to continue such meetings, both with him and with other leaders of the Roman Catholic Church.

Thank you, Matvei, for being a guest of our talk-show.

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