Metropolitan Hilarion: there always be spiritual unity between the Russian and Ukrainian nations

On September 13, Metropolitan Hilarion, host of the Church and the World talk-show on Vesti-24 TV network, had as his guest Mr. Alexander Shchipkov, editor-in-chief of the Religion and Mass Media internet portal. They discussed the religious dimension of the Ukrainian conflict.

Mr Shchipkov: Last August, two interesting documents, two letters, were published: the first one from His Holiness Patriarch Kirill to the Ecumenical Patriarch concerning events in Ukraine to be followed a few days later by a reaction to this letter by Archbishop Svyatoslav (Shevchuk), head of the Greek-Catholic Church in Ukraine. Since our TV viewers may not have read this letter, I would like, with your permission, to enumerate the points made in these letters. The letter of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill to the Ecumenical Patriarch stated that our flock in Ukraine were in a very difficult situation, that the Uniates called to seize Orthodox holy places, that thay appeared in Maidan with statements which could provoke hatred towards the Orthodox Church. His Holiness Patriarch Kirill stressed in his letter that despite the difficult situation the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate exerted all possible efforts to stay away from politics. He cited concrete, rather terrible examples of the killings of Orthodox priests in eastern Ukraine, as well as oppression, beating and all kinds of humiliation, etc. He related how the Russian Orthodox Church gives humanitarian aid and expressed fears that if those who persecute the Church take over Ukraine, the persecutions against the Orthodox may intensify. In the end of the letter he asks the Ecumenical Patriarch to raise his voice and prayer in defence of the Orthodox in Ukraine. It was a pastoral letter.

Metropolitan Hilarion: I would like to clarify that this letter was sent not only to the Ecumenical Patriarch but also to all the Local Churches. Such letters are often sent out as information since the heads of Orthodox Local Churches communicate informing one another about the most significant and tragic events in the life of their Churches. The Patriarch's letter was certainly called forth by the fact that the conflict in Ukraine has a certain religious dimension, of course. We are aware that Ukraine is a multi-confessional country in which people in various regions profess different political theories, ones attracted to the West while others to the East. But all this picture of diversity of political views and orientations is amplified by the fact that various Christian confessions have existed in Ukraine for several centuries and the Greek Catholics have played an important role in western Ukraine.

The history of coexistence of the Greek Catholics and the Orthodox in today's Ukraine, which used to be a territory of the Polish-Lithuanian Principality, is a tragic history because the *Unia* was created as a special project of the Catholic Church, intended to convert the Orthodox to Catholicism. The idea was to allow the Orthodox to preserve their own rite but to fully accept the dogmata of the Catholic Church and to submit to the pope. In place where it did not happen, the Greek Catholics resorted to the help of the civil authorities. It was with their help that the Orthodox were persecuted. This was the case after 1596, when the Brest-Litovsk Union was signed and in the early 1990s when the Uniates seized Orthodox churches with the support of the then Ukrainian authorities. And this dimension is certainly present in the present conflict as well. Perhaps it was not accidental that it was the Greek-Catholic Archbishop who was the first to respond to this letter because he felt the Greek Catholics had a direct bearing on the developments in Ukraine.

Mr. Shchipkov: The point is that the letter of the head of the Greek-Catholic Church in Ukraine, Svyatoslav (Shevchuk), is not a pastoral one. Honestly speaking, when I thoroughly read it my first thought was the need to look into it together with my politological students, because it was written after propagandistic political templates. For instance, there is a special axis around which the letter is built. This axis is the Malaysian Boeing downed in Ukraine. This story is repeated three times – in the beginning, in the middle and in the end, concluding the letter with propagandistic statements suggesting that the Boeing was downed by the Russian side. That is why this letter is not pastoral but political. It also states that in Crimea, religious communities are subjected to open violence. Where? Which communities? – No examples, no proof, only unfounded accusations. Where does this politicking come from? Where are its roots? What are the reasons for it? Why the Uniates exactly? Perhaps, there are some value differences between the Uniates and the Orthodox? What do you think?

Metropolitan Hilarion: I think that the *Unia* was a political project from the very beginning. It is not accidental that Greek-Catholic leaders have always been politicized people with certain political attitudes. It is not accidental that nationalism in western Ukraine was directly connected with the Uniate activities. It is not accidental that Uniate leaders cooperated with Fascists during World War II. All these are links of one chain and are related to the fact that, regrettably, the Catholic Church in the relations with us appears to be a kind of "two-faced Janus". On the one hand, there is the civilized Catholic Church, which in the person of the pope and the Vatican is conducting dialogue with us. This dialogue

cannot be called unsuccessful, for it has made a certain progress. Indeed, if we speak about the theological dialogue with the Catholic Church, its major success came in the adoption in 1933 – at the height of Uniate outrage in western Ukraine – of a document signed in Balamand by the both sides, the Catholics and the Orthodox, in which *Unia* is condemned as an unacceptable method of achieving unity. That is, in fact, the Catholics officially admitted at that time that the very idea of *unia* was wrong as it failed to bring the Orthodox and the Catholics closer to each others.

It was to be followed up by other steps, and the official Orthodox-Catholic dialogue was preparing a document on Pastoral and Canonical Consequences of *Unia*, which was intended as a certain code of behaviour for the Orthodox and the Greek Catholics in the territories where they existed together. But this document was never signed. At that time I was a member of that commission in 2000 when a meeting was held in Baltimore, USA. It was expected to sign it but the Catholics refused to do so, and the dialogue broke off for six years only to resume later but now with a different theme. Nevertheless, the problem of *unia* remains acute, for this theme tends to arise again and again. And what we see, including such politicized statements of Greek-Catholic leaders, is only the top of an iceberg. Indeed, this iceberg has its basis – the primordial politicized direction that was given to *unia* through close interaction between Uniate leaders and the civil authorities.

Mr. Shchipkov: I have read somewhere that the head of the Greek Catholics Svyatoslav (Shevchuk) is the Pope Francis's man and that he helped to appoint him to this see. Or is it an idle talk?

Metropolitan Hilarion: I don't feel like going into some inner configuration of the Catholic Church. But there is a certain embarrassment that we feel every time when we begin discussing problems related to the Greek Catholics. We are told that they cannot be influenced because of their autonomous status. Nevertheless, all their appointments are approved by the Vatican. The appointment of the supreme bishop and any other Catholic hierarch and the establishment of new dioceses – all this is approved by the pope with his signature. Therefore, when we are told: (I have talked with my colleagues from the Vatican more than once) we cannot influence them, the question is asked: but who can? Indeed, it is not our joint project of Uniatism. It is your project, which in its time was aimed at converting the Orthodox to Catholicism. If this project works at every new stage of situation development as it does, it means that there is something wrong in the project itself. Perhaps, at our theological dialogue we should discuss with you not such theoretical issues as primacy and synodality in the Church but should rather return to

the problem of *unia* in order to understand why this wound keeps bleeding, why we cannot find the way to heal it.

Mr. Shchipkov: Doesn't it seem to you that the aim of the Greek Catholics in Ukraine is to replace real Orthodoxy with surrogate Orthodoxy? Indeed, by attacking the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, the canonical Orthodoxy, they support schismatics – the Philaret's structure.

Metropolitan Hilarion: In the letter you have quoted, the Moscow Patriarchate is accused of disrespect for the most holy Orthodox church of the Kiev Patriarchate. Though we and the Roman Catholic Church have a long-standing mutual agreement that we do not recognize each other's schismatic structures, it turns out that they do not want to observe this agreement.

Mr. Shchipkov: That is, just as we do not recognize schismatic structures of the Roman Catholic Church, so they, too, should not recognize those who have fallen away from Orthodoxy?

Metropolitan Hilarion: Yes.

Mr. Shchipkov: The Greek Catholics have very close relations with nationalistic organizations. It is one thing for one to have some beliefs, even nationalistic – it is not for nothing that they are Bandera's descendants, but it is a completely different thing to maintain relations with specific organizations. Indeed, sooner or later, these relations will have to be accounted for legally. The fact that this is an ethnic war is already universally recognized, even by the West. But how far can this war be called religious?

Metropolitan Hilarion: I do not think it is a religious war, or as has been written recently in a newspaper, a "church war", meaning that churches, too, become objects of destruction. Bombs are

falling on churches, killing people, priests and parishioners. All this is a great tragedy, of course. But it is not a religious war, though it has a religious dimension, as the religious groups standing behind concrete political forces pursue concrete political aims.

We have repeatedly draw people's attention to the fact that in the present Ukrainian conflict there is only one Church that does not take any political stand. It is the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. It unites people of various political views and refuses to divide the faithful into good and bad, right and wrong. Whereas the Greek Catholics have taken a clear political stand and associated themselves with one of the forces in opposition in the present conflict. The same has been done by the so-called Kiev Patriarchate. From the lips of its leader you hear extremely politicized statements aiming to flare up discord among people.

Only the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church can unite people today. The task of the Church is to unite people, not to divide them along political lines. The most important thing is spiritual unity which is preserved and, I believe, will be always preserved in relations between the Russian and Ukrainian nations. Because our peoples were baptized in the same baptismal font by the holy Prince Vladimir Equal-to-the-Apostles, who entrusted Rus' with following the ways of Eastern Orthodoxy. We will continue to defend this unity, which is over a millennium-year old, despite all the political circumstances of our time, despite the efforts of schismatics and political leaders to break up the one spiritual space which we call Holy Rus'.

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