Metropolitan Hilarion's interview to National Catholic Register

How important for the Orthodox Church is the Pan-Orthodox Council planned for 2016? Is it to be seen as something similar to Vatican II in the history of the Catholic Church?

The Pan-Orthodox Council is important in that, after the era of Ecumenical Councils, it will be the first Council representing all the Orthodox Churches recognized today. For the last 12 centuries, there were Councils of various levels attended by representatives of various Churches, but this one will be the first Pan-Orthodox Council to be convened in this period. This Council is a fruit of long work carried out by Local Orthodox Churches for over 50 years. It is hardly appropriate to compare it with Vatican II because their agendas are utterly different. Besides, we do not expect it to introduce any reforms making a substantial impact on the life of Orthodoxy.

Patriarch Kirill said that the Pan-Orthodox Council should deal with such issues as expulsion of Christians from the Middle East and North Africa regions, cult of consumerism, destruction of the moral foundations and the family, cloning and surrogate motherhood. How important are these issues for you, and would you like to have other themes, such as unity with the Catholic Church, included in the Council's agenda?

These statements by His Holiness Patriarch Kirill reflect the position of the Russian Orthodox Church whereby the Pan-Orthodox Council's agenda needs to be supplemented with themes topical for today's society and requiring a response from the world Orthodoxy. Besides, there is a list of ten themes on which documents have been drafted by the Local Orthodox Churches during the many years of preparatory pre-Council work. All Orthodox Churches have already reached unanimity on eight of them and, after some improvement, these documents will be submitted to the Council. Among them is also the theme of the Orthodox Church's attitude to the continuation of dialogue with other Christian confessions including Catholicism.

Why is this Council needed and why now?

The development of conciliar mechanisms on the pan-Orthodox level is desired by all Orthodox Churches. This desire motivated the Churches from the very beginning to participate together in preparations for the Council, which began in 1961 at the Pan-Orthodox Conference on Rhodes Island. Now, as this preparatory work is approaching completion, the Council is planned to convene in 2016, if some unforeseen circumstances do not prevent it.

Russia's policy in Ukraine has provoked a serious protest in the West. What is the position of the Orthodox Church? The policy of the West over this issue is wrong?

The Russian Orthodox Church embraces Russians, Ukrainians, Byelorussians and people of many other nationalities. The spiritual unity of our nations has stood the test of time for centuries. The present political crisis in the Ukraine can hardly change anything in this respect. The position of the Russian Orthodox Church cannot be conditioned by a particular policy: indeed, the faithful of our Church are adherents of various political views; they are citizens of many states.

The closer we are to God the closer we are to one another. The faith in Christ and love of Christ unite, not divide people. We have never divided our flock on national grounds.

What is a tragedy for the Ukraine is the blood of many people, spilt in February in Kiev. Both divine and human justice demands that this disaster should be put under immediate and comprehensive investigation. However, European politicians have no unity of opinion on this issue, just as on many other issues concerning the further destiny of the Ukraine and the Ukrainian people. In this situation, the role of the Church is not to pronounce big words but to pray and compassionate.

Some maintain that the Orthodox Church and the Russian State are too close to each other. How far is it true and in what measure do these relations affect the life of the Church and its wholeness (or the opposite), especially in such matter as Ukraine's sovereignty?

The Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian State maintain mutually respectful relations based on the principles of cooperation and non-interference in each other's affairs. But similar relations are maintained by our Church with many other states as well, in whose territory she carries out her mission. The Church is the body of Christ that lives according to God-established laws and follows the spiritual and moral values manifested in the Divine Revelation. Her ministry is focused on the care for her flock, protection and promotion of traditional moral principles in private and social life and on religious education.

The Russian Orthodox Church and the state do not interfere in each other's affairs. It does not mean, however, that the Church can be indifferent to the development of the situation in Ukraine. Kiev is the cradle of Russian Orthodoxy and its original center since it is the place from which Eastern Christianity began spreading to the territory of historical Rus'. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church, while being fully independent administratively, is an integral part of the Local Russian Orthodox Church. That is why the pain of the Ukrainian faithful is our own pain. We are deeply disturbed by the manifestations of aggression towards our Ukrainian brothers and sisters perpetrated by extremists. In these days, we lift

up prayers that the civic confrontation in Ukraine may be stopped as soon as possible so that the Ukrainian people may return to peaceful life.

You have done much for the development of Orthodox-Catholic relations. What are your hopes for the future? Could a meeting between the Pope and the Patriarch take place under the present Pope Francis, or was it more probable under Pope Benedict?

True, I had to be engaged a great deal in the dialogue with the Catholic Church both in the years when I headed the secretariat for inter-Christian relations in the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations and when I, in my capacity of bishop of Vienna and Austria, served in a Catholic country, maintaining relations with representatives of the Catholic Church in Austria and Hungary. Now, as head of the Department for External Church Relations, I come to Rome each year, where I met first with Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI and now have met twice with Pope Francis. I also regularly meet with leaders of various units of the Roman Curia.

Today, we as the Orthodox and Catholics encounter similar problems in the world, and our positions on many issues coincide to a considerable extent.

The Orthodox-Catholic dialogue has been carried out on various levels: pan-Orthodox in the Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue Between the Roman Catholic Church and Orthodox Churches, and in the bilateral format as the Moscow Patriarchate conducts dialogue with Catholic Bishops' Conference in some countries. Theological dialogue has been held for thirty three years now, and its achievements are obvious, as is obvious the existence of certain differences in our doctrines.

However, the most important, though not the only, issue dividing the Catholics and the Orthodox concerns the problem of primacy in the Universal Church. The difference in its understanding once was one of the reasons that led to a division between the Western and Eastern Churches. In the East, the Pope of Rome was recognized as the successor of St. Peter, and the See of Rome occupied the first place among patriarchal thrones in accordance with Ecumenical Council's actions. However, at the same time the Eastern Church saw the bishop of Rome as "the first among equals" (*primus inter pares*) and never ascribed to him special powers as compared to those of Primates of other Churches.

Along with theological differences proper, there is the so-called "non-theological factor of the division". These are the historical memory of the past controversies and conflicts and a great deal of mutual prejudices and, unfortunately, some problems which have arisen in the modern period of history.

Still, the Orthodox and the Catholics can work together on many issues. There is a mutual understanding between the Russian Church and the Roman Catholic Church in social and economic

ethics, traditional morality and other problems of today's society. Our position on the family, motherhood, population crisis, bioethical issues, on problems of euthanasia and many other issues basically coincide.

This agreement makes it possible for our Churches to bear already now our common witness to Christ in face of the secular world. We have a very positive experience of organizing Orthodox-Catholic events both in the area of the protection of moral values and the area of cultural cooperation.

Today there is a real interest that both sides show in the fruitful development of bilateral dialogue between the Russian Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Churches. As for a meeting of the Primates of our Churches, it is quite possible, but it needs to be carefully prepared. We did not exclude that we could arrange it under the Pope Benedict but we had no time to do it. I do not see why it could not be arranged under the Pope Francis.

Already last autumn, it seemed to me that the sides were ready to begin preparing it. But the events in Ukraine have thrown us much back, first of all, because of the actions of the Greek Catholics, who are seen by the Roman Catholic Church as a "bridge" between East and West, whereas we see them as a serious obstacle to dialogue between Orthodoxy and Catholicism.

It is no secret that the Uniatism was and is a special project of the Roman Catholic Church, aimed to convert the Orthodox to Catholicism. With the help of the secular authorities, the Uniates have acted for many centuries to the detriment of the Orthodox Church, capturing Orthodox churches and monasteries, converting ordinary people to Catholicism and oppressing the Orthodox clergy in all possible ways. This was the case in the Polish Lithuanian Principality after the 1596 Union of Brest and this was the case at the end of 1980s and the beginning of 1990s in Western Ukraine.

In the present civic confrontation, the Greek Catholics have taken one side, entering into active cooperation with the Orthodox schismatic groups. The head of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church together with the head of the so-call Kiev Patriarchate, paced the US State Department offices, calling the American authorities to interfere in the situation and to put Ukraine in order. The Greek Catholics have in fact launched a crusade against Orthodoxy.

In the Vatican we are told that they cannot influence the actions of the Creek Catholics because of their autonomy. But to distance itself from these actions is something the Vatican is reluctant to do. In these circumstances it became more difficult to speak of a meeting between the Pope and the Patriarch of Moscow in the near future. We need to wait until newly inflicted wounds are healed. Nevertheless, we do not lose hope that the relations between the Orthodox and the Catholics will be normalized.

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