



Hieromonk Ioann (Kopeikin): The main criterion is the desire to serve the Church

Students' exchange with universities in other countries is of great importance for the theological education in the Russian Orthodox Church. Hieromonk Ioann (Kopeikin), secretary of the Moscow Patriarchate's Commission for Students' Exchange, speaks of peculiarities in relations with the University of Fribourg and the University of Oxford, prospects for the employment of those trained in foreign universities, the admission of foreign students in Russia, etc. in an interview to the portal of the Moscow Patriarchate's Education Committee.

Q. Tell us, please, about the work of the Commission for Students Exchange

A. The Commission was set up in 2012 on the initiative of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia. It included the head of the Education Committee and representatives of the Department for External Church Relations, the Ss Cyril and Methodius School of Post-Graduate and Doctoral Studies and the Moscow and St. Petersburg Academies. Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, head of the Department for External Church Relations and rector of the School and chairman of the Synodal Biblical-Theological Commission, was appointed as chairman of the Commission. It held its first meeting in April 2012. The meeting selected the first student candidates for training abroad whose names were submitted by the Education Committee.

Q. What is the purpose of the Commission?

A. If we speak of the tasks the Commission sets itself, the principle one is already set forth in its name: regulation of students' exchange. What does it mean?

The students exchange in itself is not something new for the external activity of the Russian Orthodox Church. Students selected by the supreme church authority have been sent abroad for twenty years now. In our estimation, today the Moscow Patriarchate has about seventy people studying abroad. Until now, the exchange process was carried out mostly through the wide contacts the DECR has abroad. Thanks to them the students of Moscow Seminary and Academy had an opportunity for studying in European universities. Some bishops used to send their students abroad through their personal contacts with faculties of various universities, established when they had studied or served abroad. In the last two decades, our Church's leading schools have become aware of the need to be integrated in the international system of science and education. This also involved the need for our students to participate in the academic exchange between universities. Thus, in the recent time a certain progress has been made in international academic cooperation and students exchange by the St. Tikhon University. The Moscow, Kiev and St. Petersburg Theological Academies have considerably broadened the area of cooperation in students exchange with Orthodox theological faculties in Europe.

Today, however, the time has come for a qualitatively new approach to students' exchange. In the recent years, thanks to the personal example and efforts of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill, the Church has considerably broadened her presence in the public life – culture, education, science, public debate and the media space. These processes certainly stimulate the rapid development of church institutions on every level. This, in its turn, leads to the objective need to have many highly qualified staff. Scholarship, broad outlook, erudition, knowledge of languages, the understanding of global social and cultural tendencies – all this becomes an important criterion along with the invariable criterion in selecting young

people for the service of the Holy Church, which is commitment and self-sacrifice. So, His Holiness the Patriarch has set a high standard for the new generation of clergy and laity involved in active church work. The tasks he has set require of clergy and staff outstanding talents and high-quality training.

This kind of “demand”, the need for young well-education personnel, dictates a new attitude to their education. Training abroad is no longer just a point of curiosity, interest or enthusiasm. To study in a university abroad is needed for one to be as helpful as possible to one’s own Church.

It has become clear that students’ exchange requires a strategic approach. This process should lead to the goal. The goal is the same for both the church authorities and students: the Church needs well-educated “doers” while well-educated young people need what to do.

Q. What educational institutions does the Commission maintain cooperation with?

A. In the first place, the Commission works with long-standing partners and friends of the Russian Orthodox Church. For many years we have maintained cooperation with the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. We have cooperated with many Catholic universities in Europe. Especially noteworthy among them is the University of Fribourg in Switzerland, in which Metropolitan Hilarion is a professor. For many years, the leadership of the university in the person of Father Rector Guido Verhauwen, professor of Fundamental Theology, have shown sincere interest in the theological legacy of the Russian Orthodox Church. The university admits annually a few of our students to be trained under Master’s and Doctor’s programs. It is the first European university to sign with the Russian Orthodox Church an agreement on joint educational programs. Thanks to this agreement, students of our School of Post-Graduate Studies have an opportunity to study concurrently at two schools under a common curriculum and, after graduation, to defend their theses in one of the partner schools, receiving two graduation certificates – one from our Church and another from a European university.

Thanks to the work of the Paris Seminary, the Russian Orthodox Church has established intensive cooperation with universities in France. Ten or fifteen years ago, we could boast of the same with regard to the University of Oxford. But in recent years, there has been a shift of the generations of theological professors, with Metropolitan Kallistos of Diokletia retired, and a considerable reformatting of the theological education itself with the infrastructure around it. “A reload” of our relations with Oxford and establishment of relations with other universities in Great Britain will become a subject of special efforts of our Commission in the coming years. Meanwhile, we have developed and strengthened our relations with theological schools in Ireland. Thanks to the support of the Primate of Ireland, Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin, the Russian Orthodox Church’s students and staff annually complete an intensive course of English in Ireland. We have also begun negotiating a possibility for training our students under long-term educational programs.

Gradually we are building our relations with various Orthodox theological faculties of Local Orthodox Churches in Greece, Poland, Serbia and Romania. This direction is especially important today. First, the quality of education in theological departments of these universities is notably growing. Secondly, students studying in them have an opportunity to stay in the Orthodox environment and receive a European graduation certificate. Finally, it is difficult to overestimate the importance of students’ exchange for supporting relations among Local Orthodox Churches.

By the way, speaking about relations with Orthodox higher education schools, I cannot help mentioning St. Vladimir’s Seminary. It is a leading Orthodox seminary, actually an academy, in the English-speaking world. Its publishing house provides Orthodox theological literature for the whole America, Great Britain and many other countries. It should not be forgotten that this school was founded by such great theologians of the 20th century, as Archpriests John Meyendorff and Alexander Schmemmann.

It is important for the Commission to broaden the geography of its international cooperation. However, its priority task is to maintain and strengthen the already existing, very solid network of contacts. As for the development of new areas, the following three factors appear decisive: the first one – the need for specialists in theological science and administrative structures; the second one – the availability of brilliant professors specializing in the areas of our concern in universities abroad; and the third one – the presence of able and motivated candidates in our reserve.

The need for particular personnel in the Church's academic, administrative and social institutions should determine the areas and dynamic of the Commission's work. I would like to underscore once again that it is the factor of demand for a particular speciality, educational form or simply for advanced education that will shape the Commission's agenda. Therefore, along with solving situational problems involved in the arrangement of training and language courses, the Commission focuses on the implementation of more long-term and science-intensive projects, among them the development of whole areas of theological scholarship, namely, patrology, liturgics, systematic and fundamental theology, ecclesiology, social theology and diakonia. Clearly, these projects are still ahead of us when the task will be set on the church-wide level and the work load will be distributed among the chairs of our Patriarchate's leading theological schools. This process has already started. The Commission is ready to make its own contribution to this process. We are ready to help the chairs in training their future researchers and assistants.

Certainly, no one of our schools will be able to cope with such church-wide tasks on its own. Therefore, it is so important for all institutions concerned to learn to work together, to unite around common projects. To unite efforts is not just a recent tendency but common sense. For all who are involved in academic educational work of our Church, be they administrators or professors or students, what I am saying now are very understandable things. The tasks before us are so complex that the existence of several centers and the established principle of collegiate interaction is the optimal *modus Vivendi*.

Q. Who can become scholarship seekers already now? What qualities must they have? Are there any criteria of the selection of students?

A. The principal criterion remains unchanged. It is one's readiness to work and to be at the disposal of the supreme authorities of the Russian Orthodox Church. Just "giftedness" and "wish to learn foreign languages" are not sufficient. Therefore, the Commission gives primary attention not to seekers who have only a formal reference letter from his bishop or other authority but those who really promise well and who are expected to produce full output after graduation. It is important for the Commission to have the efforts and resources spent on the training of a seeker compensated by this work in a particular field in the Church.

It is important to note here that the Commission is not concentrated only on the selection of potential scholars. We are no less interested in the training of future administrators, church diplomats, public relations specialists, missionaries and specialists in social work. It is not difficult for one to choose an appropriate program.

Q. Do you plan to invite foreign students for training in Russian theological schools?

We already do so. At present, there are in total over 50 students from abroad, studying in the ROC School and the Moscow and St. Petersburg Theological Academies and Seminaries. The geography is vast: in addition to students from the near-abroad countries, the Moscow Patriarchate's schools train students from Finland, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Serbia, Macedonia, Greece, Cyprus, Germany, USA, Japan, Philippines, Myanmar, China, and North Korea.

The involvement of foreign students in studies in the Moscow Patriarchate is the Commission's special concern. As experience has shown, a full-fledged training abroad does not only help to introduce a student to a different tradition and culture but also ties him up with professors and colleagues by bonds of friendship. Aware of this, we understand that the infrastructure of our education must be attractive. And much depends here on our schools themselves. They have to begin with offering a high-quality intensive course of the Russian language. Certain steps in this direction have already been made. Particularly, the St. Petersburg Academy annually offers a course of the Russian language for foreign students. In the ROC School, such a course was launched a year ago and has already begun to bring forth good fruits. Thus, in the last year, a student from Japan, a student from Slovakia and two students from Bulgaria were prepared for full-fledged training at the post-graduate course and Master's course. The language course included not only daily classes but also excursions to museums and sights in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Pskov and other cities in Russia with the aim to introduce them to the cultural heritage. This year, we expect students from the Polish Orthodox Church and America to come for training at the academies in Moscow and St. Petersburg.

Q. What do students expect to do after graduation? Is there a mechanism for their subsequent employment?

A. There is no common mechanism as such at the moment. Indeed, it would be extremely unreasonable to apply today a unified approach to the job placement of our graduates of foreign universities. In many ways, this is prompted by the Commission's aim to deal with only those candidates who are recommended by the church authorities including ruling bishops, rectors and head of synodal departments. This, in its turn, presupposes that the recommending side is interested in the student's return. This is why a student or a staff member to be sent abroad for a study or practical training should be aware of what for and who for he is going and where to and what for he is to come back. And today with regard to our students who have been sent abroad by the Commission, this principle is fully realized. But if this "natural" mechanism does not work in some case, the Commission will be ready to participate in the search of a job for a graduate. It should not be forgotten that the Chairman of the Commission is very considerate to every one of our seekers and students, and he knows many of them personally. Our Patriarch regularly asks after graduates coming back to their homeland. This interest of the Church's supreme authority will never neglect young talents.

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