Syria, the Pope, China: A Conversation with Orthodox Metropolitan Hilarion

*Moscow (**AsiaNews**) - The concern for the fate of Christians in Syria, where "extremist forces aim to completely destroy Christianity", the signs of a possible "normalization of worship for Orthodox believers in China" ; dissatisfaction in the field of theological dialogue with Catholics, but the "amazing results" in the common work on moral and the social values. In an interview with AsiaNews, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, Head of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Relations, tackles the main "foreign policy" themes of the Russian Orthodox Church and also focuses on the internal situation in Russia, where - he says - the much- criticized law against homosexual propaganda should be taken as a model by Western countries, which instead by favouring homosexual unions are heading towards "certain death."*

- The situation is dramatic is Syria, what is the Russian Orthodox Churches' view of this conflict?

- The situation in Syria deeply troubles us. This armed conflict has been going on for some time now. I would not term it a civil war, because I believe that it is a case of a struggle between diverse states in the territory of a third State, and very often the armed groups, which some call the opposition, are actually composed of foreigners, fighting with foreign money.

- ***What concerns the Moscow Patriarchate most?***

- What worries the Russian Orthodox Church most of all is the fate of the civilian population and that of the Christians. It is clear that the extremist forces seeking power have set themselves the goal of the complete and total destruction of Christianity in Syria. And if they take power, even temporarily, the Christian population will be eliminated or driven out from their lands and their churches will be destroyed. We have repeatedly expressed concern about and with the Church of Antioch, present in Syria and Lebanon, we have studied and put into practice various humanitarian programs. These involve the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society, the Russian Orthodox organization that plays an active role in the Middle East and is responsible for the delivery of medicines and meeting the needs of the population.

- There are still two Orthodox Bishops in the hands of their kidnappers in Syria.

- Yes, Metropolitan Boulos Yazigi (of the Orthodox Church of Antioch) and Metropolitan Mar Gregorios

Youhanna Ibrahim (of the Syrian Orthodox Church), whose situation troubles us. I have personally known both for many years, they are influential spiritual leaders . We are very concerned by their abduction and why in all this time that has passed (they were kidnapped on April 22 last) , we have had no news of their whereabouts or conditions . We have heard many rumors, but nothing that has ever been officially confirmed.

- ***Egypt has also experienced an escalation of violence and Christians were targeted.***

- In Egypt, we are concerned about the escalation of violence that has arisen because of the Muslim Brotherhood, an extremist movement banned in many countries, but that some time ago took power in Egypt, and lost it again. They are the root cause of this escalation of violence in the country, with the destruction of churches of different Christian denominations. We really hope that Egypt returns to peace, that a force for peace takes power, capable of respecting the inter-faith balance that has distinguished the nation over the course of many centuries.

- What point is the work of the Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between Orthodox and Catholics at. When is the next meeting ?

- The next meeting of the Commission, most likely, will be in 2014. It 's still early to talk about the results of the work of the Commission, very difficult issues are being considered, such as the primacy and the role of the bishop of Rome, which is being discussed for the first time in a thousand years. During the working sessions, some very delicate issues were also raised, not only regarding relations between Catholics and Orthodox, but also among the Orthodox Churches themselves. Unfortunately, the document that the Commission is now preparing is under embargo and, therefore, it is not possible to comment or criticize, if not within the Commission itself.
It seems to me, however, that this document does not comply with the mandate that the Commission received from the Churches and does not explain clearly what the differences and similarities between Catholics and Orthodox consist of.

- So it seems that dialogue on ethics with Catholics is more effective?

- The Joint Theological Commission is only one aspect of the ongoing dialogue between Orthodox and Catholics today. Personally I am convinced that at the moment our joint work in the field of promoting moral and social values is much more effective. I believe that the elaboration of a common position on various social and moral issues has helped us to move ahead. In particular I want to mention the work of the Catholic-Orthodox Forum, which was established some years ago and has held several meetings in different countries, dealing with issues such as family ethics. We have obtained surprising results, which are reflected in the common desire to work together for the defense of traditional Christian values.

- ***Your impressions of the new Pope?***

- I attended his inaugural Mass and the next day I had a meeting with him , during which we identified some important points of interaction between the Catholic Church and the Russian Orthodox Church. I had the impression that the Pope fully understood the importance of our common action. In addition, it was clear that these issues are not new to him, but that he knows and understands them well. This knowledge in the field of Catholic-Orthodox dialogue, as well as his previous experience in Argentina (where he repeatedly visited our Russian Orthodox parishes in Buenos Aires and was present at liturgical services, meeting the parishioners), augur well for a positive development of our relations during his pontificate.

- ***What needs to be done to achieve the meeting between the Pope and the Patriarch?***

- It has to be very carefully prepared. Concretely, we must reach agreement on those issues on which we differ today. Do you know how bilateral meetings between heads of state are arranged? Before the heads of two states meet, several groups of their closest advisors must work hard on many issues of bilateral relations. In this way, the meeting between the two leaders is not just protocol, but the fruit of a long process of preparation. We too have to prepare well for this meeting, so that it is not just protocol, but allows us to elevate our relationship to a new level of interaction, trust and understanding.

- ***What is the biggest obstacle in this regard?***

- To date, the biggest problem in this regard is the situation in western Ukraine, where in the 1980s and 1990s very sad events took place, which deprived the Orthodox communities in some towns and villages of their churches . It persists still today.

- ***Do you think we are getting any closer to such a meeting?***

- I think every day we get exactly one day closer! I can not say exactly when this meeting will take place.

- ***How would the Moscow Patriarchate view a visit by the Pope to Jerusalem, at the invitation of Patriarch Bartholomew I?***

- I guess that's a matter for bilateral relations between the Churches of Rome and Constantinople. These relations have a long history and unfortunately are marked by tragic events. I believe that the meetings between the heads of the churches of Rome and Constantinople are very important and useful in the healing of these wounds inflicted on the unity of the Church in the past.

- What was the outcome of Patriarch Kirill's visit to China in May, did it help open any spaces for religious freedom in the country?

- The whole history of Orthodoxy in China coincides with that of the Russian Orthodox Church. The Chinese Orthodox Church has always been under the jurisdiction of the Moscow. In the 1950s, not long before the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, the autonomous Chinese Orthodox Church had been established, within the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Moscow. But, with the Cultural Revolution, his whole infrastructure was destroyed. Over the past 20 years we have been trying to restore this structure and to conduct a dialogue with the Chinese authorities for the normalization of the situation of the Orthodox believers in China. For many years, the dialogue was conducted by Metropolitan Kirill. After he became Patriarch, I took over.

The Patriarch's visit to China was made possible thanks to this dialogue, over more than twenty years, with the local authorities. For now it is too early to say if there are any concrete results, but the very fact of the visit is a very significant event for the normalization of life for Orthodox believers in China.

- The Orthodox community is growing in Italy. Are you going to create a diocese ?

- I think that in Italy there is no less than a million faithful from the various Orthodox Churches, maybe even more. The Russian Orthodox Church in Italy has already registered more than 50 parishes, which constitute a diocese. This diocese for the moment is administered by Moscow, but I think in the near future, maybe in three or four years, the bishop will reside in Italy.

- ***There is a law in vigor in Russia that prohibits "the promotion of non-traditional sexual relations", a law which has raised a lot of criticism. Do you believe that the country really needs this measure?***

- I think that this law is not only necessary, but also that such laws should be adopted by other countries, in place of the rules which are launched today in the European Union on homosexual unions, which even give them the right to adopt children. I believe that this policy of Western governments is a suicidal policy, because under the conditions of the demographic crisis and destruction of the institution of the family, giving these privileges to homosexual unions means to signing the death sentence of a State, as well as a people.

- ***In what way?***

- We are under the influence of secular ideology of consumerism in interpersonal relations, advertising,

an educational system designed not to teach children to aspire to high moral values, but to free their basic instincts. Under the influence of all these circumstances, many European countries are going through a severe demographic crisis and the population is in sharp decline. This, from my point of view, it is a sign of deep spiritual sickness . If this disease is not cured, as for all diseases untreated, it will lead to death.
In this sense, I see Russia today as an example. The laws we are introducing, are directed precisely to the preservation of what we call 'the genetic background' of the nation, its 'human potential' , so that there are strong families, with many children to inhabit the vastness of the Russian territory.

- ***Many accuse the Patriarchate of being too close to the Kremlin including many faithful. What is the church and state relationship in Russia today?***

- I do not think many of our faithful are unhappy about our relationship with the State. Its just the newspapers that sometimes write about this. The last time I was in England, the BBC asked in an interview if I thought that relations between our Church with the Kremlin were too close. I replied that in Russia, relations between the State and the Church are a lot closer than in Britain, where the head of the Church and the bishops are appointed by the Queen on the recommendation of the Prime Minister. Then they asked me, do you think that the same person should not be in power for too long? And I said that we have not yet had somebody is in power for 60 years in a row, like the Queen of England. But in spite of the British democratic traditions, my answers were censored and the interview was broadcast after they had been cut off.
Today the relations between church and state in Russia are based on two principles. The first is the principle of non- interference. The Russian Orthodox Church does not endorse any political party or none in particular. As it participates in society, the Church can make its own evaluation of a political program, or certain specific problems. But the Church does not participate in the management of the State nor politics. So neither does the State participate in the management of the Church, or interfere in the choice of bishops, the Patriarch, or any internal decision.
The second principle is that of collaboration between Church and State in matters of common interest. This are primarily ethical issues, such as population policies, family ethics, the problem of abandoned children and so many other issues on which there is ample space for our cooperation.

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