His Beatitude Patriarch Theodore of Alexandria: I have given my heart to Russia

The celebrations held in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus to mark the 1025th anniversary of the Baptism of Rus' are over. Primates and representatives of all the Local Orthodox Churches had come to the Russian Orthodox Church to celebrate this importance date. Among them was His Beatitude Patriarch Theodore II of Alexandria and All Africa. He shared his impressions in an exclusive interview with the Voice of Russia radio station.

His Beatitude the **Pope and Patriarch of the Great City of Alexandria, Libya, the Pentapolis, Ethiopia All Land of Egypt and All Africa**, Father of Fathers, Pastor of Pastors, Prelate of Prelates, the Thirteenth of the Apostles and Judge of the Ecumene… Patriarch Theodore II has many titles. Due to the oversaturated celebrations schedule, we have managed to obtain his interview only on the train which took him together with other Patriarchs and representatives of the world Orthodoxy on a trip through the historical territory of Holy Rus from Moscow to Kiev and then to Minsk. 'I am very much impressed and moved by this journey', with these word Theodore II began his story:

'I attended the celebrations marking the Millennium of the Baptism of Rus' in its time', he continued', 'It was in 1988. At that time, I served in Odessa as archimandrite at the Representation of the Orthodox Church of Alexandria to the Patriarch of Moscow. At that time, our Patriarch Parthenius could not come and I had to represent him. I remember the then Patriarch Pimen. He already moved in a wheelchair at that time. The liturgy was led by the late Patriarch Ignatios of Antioch.

'I remember very well that it was a very dull day, with the sky all overcast. I had a feeling that the weather as if reminded us of the suffering experienced by the Russian people before they reached that radiant day of the Millennium of the Baptism. And when we went to Kiev, the greatest downpour I had ever seen broke out.

‘And by God’s grace, 25 years later I have come for the 1025th anniversary celebrations now as Patriarch of the Church of Alexandria.

‘I thank God and Patriarch Kirill, my dear brother, for this favour. I very much hope that we all will still celebrate the 1050th anniversary of the Baptism of Rus’.

Every now and then Patriarch Theodore, out of habit, switches over to Russian. For him, it is a favorite, if not native, language. The Primate of the Church of Alexandria can speak about Russia and the Russian people for hours. No wonder!

In the 80s, he acted for many years as Exarch of the Patriarchate of Alexandria in the Russian Orthodox Church, with the Alexandrian representation in Odessa. In the USSR, nobody was divided into Russians and Ukrainians. For us, all this was Russia. And I gave my heart to her, the Primate of Alexandria said laughing.

‘As far back as my time as a theological student in the University of Thessaloniki, I read a book about the Russian saint Seraphim of Sarov. And for seven years in a row, I prayed each evening to St. Seraphim that I could have an occasion to come to know the Russian land. Since then I would always say that my heart from now on belonged to Russia. God heard me at last and I stayed the whole ten years in Odessa. In those days, I studied Russian and could not even imagine that today the whole world would speak Russia, that it would become a language of the world significance.

‘I am very grateful to Russia and the Russian people for the opportunity for me to learn much here and to learn many things which help me in my patriarchal ministry today’.

Theodore II has headed the Church of Alexandria, one of the oldest ones in the world, for ten years now.

Before this, he headed Orthodox missions in Cameroun, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Botswana and Angola. A missionary, judge of arts and guardian of Orthodox traditions and Eastern spirituality, Patriarch Theodore II today pins great hopes on Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church:

‘I rejoice in the fact that among the old Patriarchates ours is perhaps the only one with which Russia has always been in very close and friendly relations. I am grateful to Patriarch Kirill who gave his blessing upon sanding several kids from Africa to study here and to learn the Russian language. I always enjoy speaking Russian when I meet presidents or prime ministers here in Africa, because many of them were educated in Russia’.

Theodore II’s present trip to the Russian Orthodox Church for the 1025th anniversary of the Baptism of Russia has fallen on a time difficult both for the African continent and the Middle East region. The growing Islamic radicalism has forced Orthodox Christians to flee the lands where Christianity was once born:

‘In Egypt, we as representatives of the Patriarchate of Alexandria constitute the smallest community in the country. The Coptic Church represents a greater force as the number of her adherents amounts to some 15 million. My heart is grieving especially strongly today because unrest has begun again in Egypt a few days ago. Fanatical conservative Muslims, who follow a strict Islamic routine, are in confrontation with those who stand, let us say, for the modern way of life. From my frequent contacts with people, I have figured out that the Muslim Brothers have neither resource nor wish to do anything good for their own people. Indeed, they act not for the common good but pursue their own interests.

‘It should certainly be mentioned at that that nobody has ever disturbed either the Patriarchate or me personally. We are treated with respect. Everybody knows us; we are said to be ‘Greeks’, and we see no aggression from Muslims. By nights, I often go out for a stroll in the streets just in a cassock and only with a rosary in my hands. And ordinary Muslims often invite me to drop in’.

According to the Head of the Church of Alexandria, upon his return to Egypt he plans to meet with the sheikh of the Muslims in the country and the head of the Coptic Church. Patriarch Theodore II is confident that the religious leaders will together think of a way to prevent bloodshed in the country.

Interviewer Milena Faustova

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