



Archpriest Dimitry Sizonenko on study courses for theological students abroad

The Moscow Patriarchate's commission for students exchanges directed by Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk was established a year ago by the decision of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia. Archpriest Dimitry Sizonenko, DECR secretary for inter-Christian relations and supervisor for students studying in Italy, speaks of the role the Commission plays in organizing studies abroad for the Russian Orthodox Church's theological students, the students who have an opportunity for training abroad, the places where the knowledge they receive will be used and the expectations the Commission has for these students.

Q. Father Dimitry, the Moscow Patriarchate's commission for students exchanges was set up a year ago. Who initiated it and what are its aims?

A. Commission was set up with the blessing of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia. Its task is to coordinate international educational projects on the church-wide level. Educational projects did exist in the past, but the selection of participants was of the random character. It often happened so that students trained abroad were left to their own devices and were not quite sure what they would do upon their return to Russia. The task of the Commission is to see that this state of affairs should not continue.

Q. How? If a student is not fully occupied with his studies but wastes his energy on secondary things, are there measures to influence him?

A. The responsibility for controlling the progress of a student's training is placed on the supervisor, and in some cases the Commission is authorized to resort to an early termination of a student's term. To prevent unforeseen situations, the Commission's secretariat requests that a student hand in an annual report with a testimonial from his academic adviser. On the basis of this information, the Commission makes an annual report on its work to His Holiness the Patriarch and the Supreme Church Council.

Q. And how matters stand with regard to the medical insurance?

A. A student's medical insurance and all the necessary costs of his training and accommodation are covered from his scholarship.

Q. Is the Commission responsible not only for the training of our students abroad but also for admitting trainees from other countries to our theological schools?

A. The Commission's terms of reference include the training of foreign students in the educational institutions of the Moscow Patriarchate. We give special attention to the students who are sent to Russia by the supreme authorities of Local Orthodox Churches.

Q. What other countries and areas of cooperation have priority in the work of the Commission at present and why?

A. At present the Moscow Patriarchate maintains very close cooperation with universities in Greece, Serbia, Romania, Italy, Germany, Switzerland and France.

The priorities in subjects of studies are, first of all, theological disciplines, Patristics and Church History, since the knowledge acquired in these areas will be much in need in the educational, missionary and external church work of our graduates.

Q. You direct the work for cooperation with educational institutions in Italy. What exactly does this cooperation consist in and why is it given special attention today?

A. For several decades the Commission for Cultural Exchange of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity has given grants for Russian theological students to study in major Catholic universities in Europe. For those who wish to dedicate themselves to the service of the Church, it is a wonderful opportunity for receiving an excellent theological education and experience of life in an international

students environment.

In the first place, a study in Rome gives one a unique opportunity for inter-Christian fellowship, an opportunity to make oneself familiar with rich traditions of both early and modern Christianity, to learn to conduct theological dialogue and to meet the challenges of today's secularized world. On the other hand, the presence of our students constitutes a sort of mission making it possible for the voice of the Orthodox Church to be heard by a wide range of non-Orthodox Christians.

Q. And what about the cooperation with theological schools in other Orthodox Local Churches?

A. Training in the theological schools of Local Orthodox Churches has various advantages. First of all, these contacts are essential for the development of international cooperation in the sphere of theological education in the Orthodox context and for consolidation of intra-Orthodox unity. High-level Orthodox theological education is a convincing testimony to the universal nature of Orthodoxy, which can serve as a sort of antidote for schisms.

Q. Tell us please about the Commission's cooperation with the Vatican's educational institutions. What criteria are used for selecting them? Can we already speak about its results?

A. Cooperation with Catholic educational institutions began as far back as the era of the late Metropolitan Nikodim (Rotov). On all the stage of history, this cooperation has been extremely important for the training of new generations of theologians and prominent hierarchs of the Russian Church. What is required to obtain a scholarship is, in the first place, a basic theological education, an interest in the study of foreign languages and the motivation.

Q. And how this training is financed?

A. The Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity makes regular annual allocations for a certain number of scholarships.

Q. Who can participate in the training organized by the Commission, for instance, in Italy? Who can use this opportunity – only students or anyone who works on the staff of a particular church structure?

A. The scholarships I mentioned are granted for the full-fledged training for a Master's or Doctor's degree. This demands, I would say, a candidate's selfless readiness to study seriously and afterwards to lovingly serve the Church; otherwise, the years spent in a university will prove to be a waste of money and effort. There are opportunities for short-term linguistic training which can be undertaken by staff members of synodal institutions on a part-time basis.

Q. Can a person who is not a student of theological schools or a staff member of synodal institutions and who is willing to study and to work after that in church structures be sent to study abroad through the Commission?

A. I believe the decisive factor here is one's readiness to work for the Church upon completion of one's training. To do it, it is not necessary to be a seminarian or a staff member of a synodal institution. We wish to send worthy candidates and to receive in return highly qualified personnel.

Q. Which personnel exactly? Is there any real demand from church structures?

A. Training programs in Western universities represent a diversity of compulsory disciplines and special courses both in subject and method.

Unfortunately, what you described as demand from church structures does not use the opportunities offered in full measure. As experience has shown, our students take the greatest pleasure in the studies of Church History, Patristics, Liturgical and Biblical Theology. And the number of trained students to a considerable extent depends on the number of scholarships offered.

Q. The organization of training is a costly affair. Normally, a graduate who studied abroad at the expense of an educational institution is supposed to work off the knowledge received upon his return. How are things with the training you arrange?

A. I would approach this problem from the other angle. Theological knowledge without one's personal formation is like a clanging cymbal. Curiosity is not sufficient for successful training abroad. It is necessary to be in living relationship with the Church through a spiritual mentor or a school and to have

the feeling of being part of the common cause.

The chairman of the Commission, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, has formulated this problem in this way: 'Students expect from us as supreme authority some support and motivation. We, in our turn, expect from the students to show a responsible attitude, successful personal performance and, after that, a creative contribution to our common task to preach the gospel of Christ and to build His Church'.

Q. According to the Commission's regulations, a student who undertook a training, can approach the Chairman of the Commission with a request for assistance in employment or he can petition the ruling bishop of his diocese. Unfortunately, the situation is such that what dioceses need are clergy, while s linguistic or other education is not always in demand. That is to say, one is needed as a priest and not needed as an expert. Does cooperation with the Commission give certain guarantees of subsequent employment or even a graduate of a course can happen to find nothing to do?

A. Job placement is one of the tasks of the Commission, just as concern for the further fate of those who were trained abroad. But I am sure that a creative person cannot remain with nothing to do, for the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few (Mt. 9:37).

Q. How and who shall one apply to for a training abroad?

A. The applications for training abroad are received in the period from September 1 to April 30. The list of the necessary documents is available on the Commission's site. An application should be addressed to His Eminence the Chairman.

Q. To whom can theological students and professors interested in their students' training abroad make inquiries?

A. All those interested can address the secretary or members of the Commission. All the addresses and telephone numbers are available on our site at <http://studexchange.ru/>.

Q. What kind of students will be categorically rejected as trainees? What are the restrictions?

A. There are no restrictions. I would like to mention once again that what is decisive in the consideration of candidates is their motivation.