Metropolitan Hilarion's interview with the Vesti v Subbotu (News on Saturday)

Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, head of the Moscow Patriarchate's department for external church relation, in his talk with Sergey Brilev, anchorman of the Vesti v Subbotu (News on Saturday) of the Russia 1 TV network, spoke about Pope Benedict's decision to retire and Orthodox-Catholic relations.

Brilev: There is certain ticklishness in what we are going to discuss because neither you nor I are Catholic. You though are a one who is much more well-versed in, if I may say, the church mechanics, but not necessarily wishing to reveal it all to journalists. Nevertheless, tell me how have you taken the news about the resignation of the Pope of Rome?

Metropolitan Hilarion: This news was a surprise for everybody including the Pope's closest entourage. The dean of the Cardinals College Angelo Sodano is known to say that it was 'like a bolt from the blue'. Actually the Pope of Rome has dropped some hints in recent years that it may happen, and it was not accidental that he visited the tomb of Celestine V, one of few popes who abdicated and was later canonized.

Pope Benedict XVI was contemplating it. I believe his decision resulted from his responsible attitude to his office. Most likely, having assessed his physical resources, he made this, I would say, wise decision.

Brilev: There are several details I would like to move back to consecutively. I will cite you yourselves. You said that it was ‘an act of personal courage’ on the part of the Pope of Rome himself but at the same time there are words of his brother Georg who said, ‘No, everything is all right with his health; he is simply tired’. I render it freely but in essence the words sounded exactly like that. In this connection, there is still certain scepticism with regard to this decision of Benedict XVI. I can already feel that you do not share it, but how would you comment on it?

Metropolitan Hilarion: I do not share this scepticism, nor do I agree with the opinion of some people who are ready to speak about a conspiracy theory in this situation.

I personally met with the Pope on three occasions. Certainly, his health is not bad for his age, though in the few years I have had an opportunity to observe him, he has visibly aged, and, as they say, slipped a lot. Besides, it should be taken into account that he has never seen his office as ceremonial, and I believe never craved for it but took the election as a cross placed on him to bear. I believe he made his decision from the feeling of responsibility as he understands that with time he will get older and weaker. That is why he made the decision to give his post up to somebody else.

Brilev: Let me ask a question than may seem to many to have a second bottom. Perhaps it really has it. According to many, Benedict XVI’s decision was catalysed by the criticism levelled against the Catholic Church as, regrettably, cases of sexual abuse of children and many other things have accumulated in it. For instance, the case of this butler was rather loud. I refer to it because the Russian Orthodox Church has sometimes found itself attacked by both open and covert ill-wishers, etc. Has the criticism voiced become a catalyst or no? What do you think?

Metropolitan Hilarion: It is difficult to say. I believe the Pope has weighed all the circumstances. Really, the Catholic Church has recently come to face new challenges. In some sense they are old because under Pope John Paul II the Catholic Church was criticized for conservatism and traditionalism. The criticism came from the extremely liberal Western society. At the same time, Pope John Paul II was popular with the mass media; one can say he was a media-star.

In those years Benedict XVI was at his side. He was a cardinal then, leading one of the major congregations. He saw the process of aging and dying, but not in the way the mass media look at it. He saw it with the eyes of a church man and understood that actually for some time the Church was left without real governance under a living pope or the governance was entrusted to other people. I believe as a witness to this he did not want to repeat this experience in his own life.

Brilev: You spoke about Celestine V. He is mentioned in Dante's 'Divine Comedy' and the author seems to accuse him of faint-heartedness.

Metropolitan Hilarion: Here is for you an example of different views of the church reality. Dante put Celestine V in Hell while the Catholic Church has canonized him.

Brilev: Never in my life have I thought that I would catch you up on a word, but unexpectedly I did. Speaking now about the first hierarch of the Catholic Church, you mentioned simply a pope. At the same time, as far as I can understand it, in the Orthodox system of coordinates one should necessarily add the words 'of Rome', for there is the Pope of Alexandria, who is much more close to the Russian Orthodox Church canonically.

It is just an introduction to the question I wanted to ask. You and the Catholics have a common negative agenda, for instance, the unacceptability of same-sex marriages for both Russian Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism – the fact often mentioned now in the news. Do you have a common positive

agenda?

Metropolitan Hilarion: Yes, we have, because, in the first place, both the Orthodox and the Catholics have a common faith in One God glorified in the Trinity, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Both the Orthodox and the Catholics are at one in confessing Christ as God-Man. We have differences in dogmatic matters, not as strong as those on which we agree. We disagree on the understanding of the procession of the Holy Spirit. The Orthodox confess that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father, while the Catholics say the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. It is a long historical dispute; it has lasted for over a millennium.

In addition, we have common approaches to all the fundamental moral and social issues. For instance, our family ethics is almost identical. Why do the Catholics stand out against the legalization of abortion, support of same-sex unions and adoption by same-sex couples? Because both the Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church build their moral teaching on the biblical foundation. We share it.

Brilev: Incidentally, there is also a biblical foundation concerning the description of the job of the Pope of Rome, sorry for somewhat Soviet term. The Lord describes the Apostle Peter as the rock on which His Church is built (cf. Mt. 16:18), but there is no mention in the Bible about this to be continued by some elected people. In this connection, I am going to ask you a rather slippery question: Does Russian Orthodoxy accept papacy as such?

Metropolitan Hilarion: We do not accept papacy in the form it has developed in the second millennium. We always state that in the first millennium when Christianity was united in East and West, the Pope of Rome was the Patriarch of the West, that is to say, he was one of the heads of Local Churches. After the division between East and West later, the primacy in the Orthodox family went to the Patriarch of Constantinople, while in the West a theory was developed whereby the pope actually stands above the Church as he is immune from prosecution by the Church and he confirms the decisions of Councils, while in the Orthodox East it is a Council that confirms any decision of a Patriarch, and so on.

By the way, the present situation raises certain dilemmas before the Catholics themselves. For instance, it is not known at present with what title Benedict XVI will retire. Will his title be the Pope of Rome Emeritus (honorary) or he will become again Cardinal Ratzinger? Will he preserve the name he took when he became pope? Furthermore, there is the question of the infallibility of the pope, which we, Orthodox, challenge as well. Will it remain with him or will the infallibility abandon him at 20:00 on February 28?

Brilev: Along with relations between Orthodoxy and the Holy See, there are relations of Russia as a state with the state of Vatican. By the way, the Holy See and the Vatican are sometimes confused while these are different notions. In the last four years, the level of diplomatic relations between the two states has been elevated to the level of ambassadors, which was not the case before. Has it helped you or not?

Metropolitan Hilarion: I believe it has neither helped nor impeded, because relations between Churches are different from those between states. We have our own accumulated problems in relations with the Catholic Church, the more so that the Russian Church is not only the Church of the Russian Federation but also the Church of Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Moldova and a number of other countries.

Brilev: In which, I would add, you collide with the Catholics.

Metropolitan Hilarion: I will mention in particular what happened in late 80s-early 90s in Western Ukraine. This situation remains to be an unhealed wound on the body of the Orthodox Church and a stumbling block in the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue. But in the 90s the Orthodox and the Catholic condemned *unia* together. It was a very important step and very important achievement in the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue. Few are aware of it but the Catholics agreed that *unia* was not a way towards unity, that it is a mistaken strategy, a mistaken policy. Nevertheless, some consequences of that policy have remained, preventing us from living together and moving together on the way of Christian witness.

Brilev: Correct me if I am wrong. It seems that uniate cardinals are members of the conclave which is to elect the Pope of Rome.

Metropolitan Hilarion: Yes, in the conclave there are cardinal of the so-called Eastern Rite, but exactly Cardinal Husar, who until recently headed the Greek-Catholic Church, will not sit in the conclave, because a few days before Benedict XVI's retirement he will be 80.

Brilev: Thank you very much. Using our language, we will closely follow the development of the situation.

Metropolitan Hilarion: Thank you.

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