Metropolitan Hilarion lectures at Villanova University in the USA

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On 31 October 2012, Metropolitan Hilarion read a lecture at the Villanova University, an oldest educational institution in the USA, located northwest of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

The DECR chairman addressed the audience, saying, “I wish to offer up my thanks to God for our today’s meeting, which is taking place in spite of the weather. The hurricane that people have been expecting with awe and which was threatening to cause colossal damage to the eastern shore of the United States, reached New York and other cities, including Philadelphia. People died, the infrastructure of many cities was destroyed, ground and air traffic has not been restored. However, according to weather forecasters, the situation could have been much worse.”

Metropolitan Hilarion’s lecture was dedicated to the past and present of Orthodox-Catholic dialogue. He said in the beginning: “The teaching of the holy fathers of the first millennium, when the Churches of the East and the West abided in unity, although at times this unity was subjected to serious trials, is the sure foundation upon which dialogue between Christians can develop successfully and fruitfully. It is my profound conviction that fidelity to the Christian tradition, the preservation of continuity in the teaching and life of the Church is the proper means for the restoration of unity among Christ’s disciples.

“It is because of the renunciation by some Protestant denominations, as well as parts of the Anglican communion, of the ancient Christian tradition that it has become ever more difficult for the Orthodox Church to continue co-operation with them. I regret this, but the dialogues with Protestants and Anglicans which we have had for decades are now under threat because of processes taking place in the Protestant communities of the West and North. I mean the continuing liberalization in the field of theology, ecclesiology and moral teaching. Certain denominations have legitimized the blessing of same-sex unions and the ordination of people openly declaring their non-traditional sexual orientation.

“We are obliged to speak about this because we want to preserve the good that was achieved during the years of dialogue between Orthodox on the one hand and Protestants and Anglicans on the other. In defending the two-thousand-year-old tradition of the Church, we remain true to this dialogue, yet at the same time we see that Protestants and Anglicans are growing away from us by accepting innovations which we find unacceptable.

“I am speaking of this in the walls of a Catholic university by no means because I am afraid to criticize Anglicans and Protestants to their faces. On the contrary, every time the opportunity arises, I speak openly of our concern in direct dialogue with our brothers from the Anglican and Protestant communities. Thus, for example, in 2010 at a festive dinner at the Nicaea Club in London in the presence of the Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams I stated the sad fact that the ‘Orthodox and Anglican Churches are to be found on different sides of the abyss which separate Christians of a traditional direction and Christians adhering to liberal teachings’. And as recently as the day before yesterday I spoke of the same things at the old Episcopalian seminary at Nashotah House, a contemporary of your University.

“Unlike dialogue with the Protestants and Anglicans which has reached a dead end, dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church seems to have a future to it precisely because, like the Orthodox Church, the Catholic Church does not think of itself outside of Tradition and strives to teach and live in accordance with the tradition of the apostles and holy fathers. In my view, the significant improvement and strengthening of relations between our Churches that can be seen in recent years is connected to an awareness that we are united by a common heritage, thanks to which both Orthodox and Catholics can and must together bear witness to the world of the eternal values of the Gospel.”

Metropolitan Hilarion spoke in length of the history of Orthodox-Catholic dialogue in the twentieth century and then noted an event of historical importance.

Last August, His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia visited Poland. During the visit, he and the chairman of the Polish Episcopal Conference Archbishop Józef Michalik signed a joint epistle to the peoples of Russia and Poland. “This appeal by the Moscow Patriarchate and the Roman Catholic Church in Poland calls upon the Russian and Polish peoples, who have a history of mutual alienation and enmity, to be reconciled and show forgiveness in the spirit of Christian love. At the heart of this truly historical epistle is a reminder of the common Christian tradition and values which for many centuries have inspired both nations, taught them self-sacrifice and love of neighbours and those who are afar,” the speaker underscored.

The DECR chairman also spoke about cooperation between the Orthodox and the Catholics in protection of traditional Christian values:

“The Orthodox and Catholics encounter the same challenges which modern times lay down to the tradition way of life. In this instance we are dealing not with theological problems but with the present and future of humanity. It is in this sphere which the Orthodox and Catholics can interact without compromising their ecclesiastical identity. In other words, while not yet being the one Church, in being separated by various theological and ecclesiological problems, we can find ways of interacting which

would allow us to respond jointly to the challenges of the modern world.

“Together we can help people realize what the traditional Christian values are – the family, the worth of human life from conception to death, the upbringing of children, the integrity and indissolubility of marriage. All of these concepts in the modern secular world are subjected to a radical re-evaluation. Today in Western society the traditional family way of life has in effect been destroyed, as a result of which there has been a gradual decline in the populations of Western nations. This is a very simple and real indication of the spiritual health or spiritual disease of a particular nation. If the population of a country is increasing this means that there are in the nation healthy forces which allow this to happen; if the population decreases, this is a sign of disease. And the disease in this instance is that in society there is an absence of the traditional notion of the family.

“At the basis of this worldview there lies the destruction of the traditional family way of life and today, if we are to speak of the Christian communities, the traditional way of life of the family is preached only by the Orthodox and Catholic Churches. This does not mean that all believers follow the teaching of their Church, but on an official level it is the Orthodox and Catholic Churches which defend the integrity of marriage, believe abortion to be a sin and call for an end to it, and believe that euthanasia is unacceptable. If you compare, for example, the ‘Foundations of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church’ which speaks about very many moral and social problems with the Catechism of the Catholic Church which outlines the official teaching of the Catholic Church on these problems, then everywhere you will see that their positions are similar. This means that we can combine our endeavours in order to protect jointly traditional values such as the family, giving birth, how children are brought up and the integrity of marriage. This is the field where we can and must today interact with the Catholics.”

The DECR chairman believes that experiments in the gender sphere which are taking place today with ever increasing regularity, is also a relevant and urgent topic:

“Several weeks ago the media reported that in the United States a lesbian couple began to give their eleven year-old adopted son Tommy drugs that would halt the development of his male hormones. The couple claims that since the age of three the boy has experienced problems with sexual identification and has long since believed himself to be a girl. We can only guess at what methods these two women have used to turn their adopted son into a person similar to themselves. The anti-hormonal ‘therapy’ will continue until the age of fifteen when Tommy will have to decided finally which gender he wants to be. Leaving aside the medical aspect of this, I would like to look at the ethical nature of this incident. The lesbian adopted ‘parents’ are ‘helping’ an under-age boy to change his sex. In my view this is a monstrous perversion and crime for which these two women should be held criminally responsible. However, the state has not intervened into this situation.

“In this regard I am convinced that co-operation of all Christian confessions, and first of all between the Orthodox and Catholic Churches, is greatly needed for the protection of human life and its inalienable dignity as well as the family. Therefore we who are united by faith in Christ and a two-thousand-year-old Christian tradition have to bring with renewed strength the good news to the world of the family and marriage as institutions created by God. In accepting the challenge of the real world, the Christian family is to be as before the hope and pledge of a Christian civilization. It is essential to protect and support a cultural tradition which is favourable to the family, the indissolubility of marriage and the need for marital fidelity by taking an active part in the creation of legislation that favours the family and its natural foundation and by imparting to society the ideals of the majesty and perfection of the family vocation.”

Metropolitan Hilarion believes that another important direction that is acquiring greater relevance for our possible cooperation between the Orthodox and Catholics is the protection of Christians from discrimination:

“Unfortunately, in the countries of the so called Arab Spring, as well as in a whole number of other countries of the Middle East, Africa, Asia and Oceania, Christians are subjected to discrimination, persecution and repression. This obvious fact is passed over in silence by the media which prefers to ignore this problem. Moreover, in planning military intervention into a particular country of the Arab world or in preparing the overthrow of the existing regime in a particular country with the help of outside force, Western strategists, it would appear, completely fail to take into account the fact that the main victims are often local Christians.

“There are many examples of this. In Iraq only a tenth of a million-and-a-half Christian population that lived there ten years ago has survived. In Egypt we are witness to a mass exodus of Christians. There are practically no Christians left in Libya. Ninety five percent of Christians have abandoned Homs in Syria. We, Orthodox and Catholics, must raise our voices jointly in defense of Christians subjected to persecution and repression in the aforementioned countries, as well as in Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Indonesia, the Philippines, Nigeria and in a number of other countries.

“The countries of Europe have traditionally defended the interests of Christians, for example, in the Middle East or in Far Eastern Asia. In the present circumstances we hope that the resolution adopted by the European Parliament on 20 January 2011 on the position of Christians in the context of religious freedom, as well as the declaration of the Committee of Foreign Ministers of the European Union on 22 February, will have practical consequences. They were a result of active participation of the Christian Churches in this direction. We hope that the USA will join us in the defense of Christians.

“On 30 November 2011 in Moscow at the initiative of the Russian Orthodox Church there was held an

international conference called ‘Freedom of religious confession: the problem of discrimination and persecution of Christians’. It is a joy that the Roman Catholic Church in the person of high representatives of the Holy See, the Catholic communities of Russia, the Middle East and Pakistan took an active part in organizing it.

Today Christians are subjected to harassment not only in those countries where they comprise a minority but often in those countries with ancient and deep-rooted Christian traditions. Certain European countries are trying to limit the manifestation of Christian faith in public life by claiming that they are thereby observing the rights of adherents of other religions and atheists. This situation demands that Orthodox and Catholic show solidarity in their actions in protecting the Christian identity of Europe and America.

“In my greetings address to the thirteenth Synod of Catholic Bishops in Rome on October 16, I challenged my brethren from the Catholic Church to create a united front for the defense of the Christian faith in those countries where it is persecuted and harassed. The Christian communities of Syria and other Middle Eastern countries are crying out for help at a time when the Western media ignored their pleas for aid. Politicians too are closing their eyes to this unprecedented wave of persecution. We, the Orthodox and Catholics from around the world, have to raise our voice in defense of Christians and the Christian traditions of the Middle East. It is our duty to appeal constantly to political leaders, international organizations and the media by reminding them of this humanitarian tragedy unfolding before our eyes. I have to say that my words found a lively response among the Synod fathers, especially those who represent Catholic communities in those countries where Christians are persecuted.”

In conclusion of his address Metropolitan Hilarion underscored: “It is essential for the Orthodox and Catholics today to perceive each other not as rivals but as allies in the cause of the defense of Christians’ rights. We must develop interaction outside of the success or otherwise of theological dialogue, independent even of how relations between the Orthodox and Catholics take shape in concrete regions around the world. We must build this interaction proceeding from a common strategic task since we are dealing with the future of humanity. It is upon our joint endeavours that the future of Christianity in the third millennium will primarily depend.”

Villanova University, founded by the Augustians in 1842, is a largest Catholic educational institution in the USA. Studying here are over 10,000 students from different countries of the world.

Source: https://mospat.ru/en/news/53510/