



Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk: the peace we need

In his article published in Gazeta Wyborcza on the first day of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill's visit to Poland, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, head of the Moscow Patriarchate's department for external church relations, discusses the challenges of today facing Christians in Russia and Poland.

The coming of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and Russia to Poland is part of the tradition of visits made to Local Orthodox Churches by the Primate of the Russian Orthodox after his election. The fraternal invitation of the Primate of the Polish Church, Metropolitan Sava of Warsaw and All Poland, and the hospitality of the Bishops' Conference in Poland and the interest the Polish society shows for the visit – these are prerequisites of His Holiness's trip to the Polish land.

Poland is a country in which Christian faith is alive. People who were subjected to mocking by adherents of atheistic ideology for long years have been given an opportunity to baptize their children, to raise them up in the religious tradition and to live openly in accordance with their own beliefs. This is a good sign of the spiritual regeneration of the Polish people, the joy of coming back to the faith experienced as well by Christians in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and other states which went through years of theomacy.

In our countries, there is another tradition of social development which disturbs every Christian. The modern society stakes on material development, economic growth and prosperity. The concern for daily bread, effective governance in economy and even for comfort is a necessary thing. However, we often see how the desire to meet one's earthly needs becomes the only goal in one's life. It points to a spiritual crisis which affects the whole society, not just the individual. The individual who seeks to indulge in his passions destroys his freedom, caught in slavery to sin.

Certainly, one is free to choose the way of ordering one's life and the principles to follow in it. But if this choice has no moral dimension it may destroy one, and if it is exalted to the absolute, it may destroy the society itself. To stay indifferent to this problem means to contribute to this pernicious process.

In our days, there is much talk about freedom and human rights, even more than ever in the history of humanity. But do today's politicians understand what human freedom is and how it can be of benefit to people? Is the possibility to choose valuable if what is chosen is falsehood and injustice? The European cannot find an answer to these questions outside the Christian tradition on which the entire civilization is built.

The notion of freedom brought to the point of absurdity presents a threat to the whole Christian culture. These are not big words. Among the blazes of publicity was the case of Lautsi vs. Italy considered by the European Court of Human Rights. It is more than typical for our days. The citizen by name of Lautsi voiced her objection to the presence of the crucifix in Italian public schools which her children attended. She maintained that the presence of religious symbols violated their rights and freedoms. It was only thanks to the joint efforts of a great number of countries that the court ultimately ruled not in her favour. The tendency of ousting religious symbols from public space however is preserved and developed in European countries.

Why are then Christian symbols so offensive for non-believers? Why do liberal circles believe it a good form to speak with contempt about the moral norms which have been preserved by Churches in Europe

from early centuries? Christian life in all its manifestations testifies to the immutable truth and the value of self-restriction and modesty. These notions are alien to the logic of the consumerist and egoistic thinking. Those who have lost relations with God see in the symbol of crucifix a reproach for their unrighteous life and a reminder of death shunned by those who live by temporal interests alone.

Regrettably, in most countries of Europe a formalized attitude to human freedom has prevailed. Confused by sin, the consciousness of people, who use the freedom of choice as a pretext, works steadily for self-destruction. The most vivid evidence to this is demographic realities of our days. The propaganda of the so-called free love, the legalization of prostitution and same-sex cohabitations has turned the traditional family into a degenerating institution in many European countries.

The idea of building European space in which the moral heritage of Christianity is seen as a vestige of the past is a real threat to the future of the continent. Often this policy is realized through pressure upon state structures and the public opinion contrary to the interests of most Christians and people of other traditional religions. For instance, there are a number of cases where the Polish side was subjected to the influence of European international structures for having adopted legitimate measures to protect the younger generation against obscene things. Similar criticism has been lodged against Russian legislators in some Russian regions who have banned the propaganda of homosexuality among minors under the threat of fine. It is inadmissible interference in internal affairs. Peoples who remain Christian cannot be deprived of the sovereign right to organize their internal life on their own, without diktat from outside.

In face of the challenges of our time, traditional Christians in today's Europe are called to unite efforts for defending their common identity. We should not allow external force to manipulate our international contradictions. That is why one of the aims of Patriarch Kirill's visit to Poland is to sign a document on the reconciliation of the nations. In this joint message to be issued on behalf of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Bishops' Conference in Poland, there is a call to abandon enmity and suspiciousness, forgiving all mutual historical grievances. The basis of the document is not political expedience but appeal to the sincere religious feeling of Russians and Poles. Without sincere faith it is impossible to give forgiveness, which is called to bring closer the two nations who suffered from the 20th century wars and revolutions. Let us remember that Orthodox and Catholic priests and lay people suffered in the hands of people who were filled with hatred towards religion as such and who persistently did everything possible to destroy it.

Signing the joint document, the Christian leaders of Russia and Poland make an important step for strengthening friendship and cooperation between our two nations and do it contrary to the opinion of the politicians who continue to believe mutual grievances to be an object for bargaining. In our view, it is incompatible with the memory of many and many people to whom the Russian-Polish enmity cost their lives. Our prayer is that a true fraternal peace, friendly dialogue and cooperation may be restored in face of common challenges between the peoples of Russia and Poland who keep faithful to their faith. We believe it is possible with the help of God.

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