Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk: Russians and Poles should move towards each other as Christians and kin

- During Patriarch Kirill's visit to Poland, among its focuses will be the signing, together with Archbishop Jozef Michalik, of a document on reconciliation between the Russians and the Poles. Pease, tell us about this document in more detail.

- It is our deep conviction that relations between the peoples of Russia and Poland, which were repeatedly darkened in history by hatred, wars and enmity, can and must be improved. It is not a demand of the current political situation but a challenge of time. In a situation where the Christian heritage of Europe is subjected to revision, when traditional values are challenged by adherents of political correctness and militant secularism, Christians are called to defend together their ideas of virtue and justice. Guided by this approach, we have begun a fraternal dialogue with the Catholics in Poland to result in the signing of a document on the reconciliation of the two peoples. The drafting of this document has already taken a considerable time but mutual understanding has been already found on many issues.

The content of the document excludes any political constructs. Its text rests upon the Christian ideas of sin and forgiveness and a failure to follow them may make the reconciliation of our two nations mere words. We will address those in Russia and Poland who are aware that the way of seeking after those who are right and who are wrong and pride and arrogance contradict Christian conscience. In calling the Russians and Poles to friendship and fraternal love, we believe that reconciliation is possible in reliance on sincere faith and trust in the help of God Who blesses every good initiative.

- Can the Churches of the two countries really contribute to the strengthening of relations between the Russians and Poles today?

- Through centuries, Christianity has been the dominating religion both in Russia and Poland. To a considerable extent it determines the system of values and the way of life in our two countries. Most Russians are spiritually nourished by the Russian Orthodox Church, while most Poles by the Polish Catholic Church. This demands that our two Churches be involved in public life. Indeed, people see in the Church an authoritative power and wish to hear her opinion on diverse issues.

The Russians and Poles share a centuries-long history. We have come out of the same Slavic family, we are neighbours, and we confess Christian faith. Our relations have not always been marked with progressive development. There were difficult and dramatic moments. Regrettably, the recent episodes have come to dominate our historical memory and to become a focus of attention for some public forces and journalists. It is my deep conviction that these tendencies are wrong. We as kin and Christians should move towards each other with open hearts.

Religious communities can contribute to this reciprocal movement. The Church is not liable to conjecture, nor does she express the interests of any political group. She is immutable in her calling, which is the tireless preaching of the gospel's truths commanded by Jesus Christ. And the ideals built in Holy Scriptures are held dear by any person of good will, be he or she believer or not. These are peace and mutual forgiveness. The Church, using her own resources such as pastoral mission and social

service, helps to make these categories decisive in relations between people and nations.

The Moscow Patriarchate and the Catholic Church in Poland have already made concrete steps to help strengthen Russian-Polish relations. I mean in the first place the already mentioned message to the peoples of Russia and Poland prepared by our Churches. This document expresses our common Christian approach to Russian-Polish relations.

- Poland is one of the main pillars of Catholicism in Europe. Can the Patriarchal visit to this country be regarded as a certain signal to the Vatican, including in the context of the discussion on prospects for a meeting between the Pope of Rome and the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia?

- His Holiness the Patriarch is visiting Poland first of all as a guest of His Beatitude Metropolitan Sava, Primate of the Polish Orthodox Church, thus making a fraternal visit to another Local Orthodox Church.

Nevertheless, an important circumstance in this case is the fact that Poland is predominantly Catholic country as most of her population belong to the Catholic Church. This aspect will certainly make the Patriarchal visit special, the more so that it is the first ever visit to Poland by a Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church. As is known, His Holiness will also meet with the presidium of the Conference of Catholic Bishops in Poland to sign together with its president, Archbishop Jozef Michalik, a joint message to the peoples of Russia and Poland.

It can be said that the Patriarchal visit to Poland is called to help develop the dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church in Poland and reconcile the Russian and Polish people who experienced periods of mutual enmity and misunderstanding in the past.

- What is your assessment of the steps made by Poland to advocate Europe's Christian roots?

- We are well aware of the fact that the membership in the European Union is sometimes linked with political pressure brought to bear by leading bodies of this organization. Often using as a cover the slogans of freedom, equality and non-discrimination, European institutions seek to promote the models of behaviour incompatible with the Christian ideas of morality. The most vivid example is the issue of legalization of marriages between representatives of sexual minorities. Many EU states have already equalized the traditional family with cohabitation of same-sex people which is contrary to human nature. Through the European influence, the so-called anti-discrimination legislation has been pressed through within the European Union. Poland's concerns are shared by many Orthodox believers in Russia, who are ready to cooperate with Polish conservative organizations already now.

- Tell us please about the cooperation of the Moscow Patriarchate with the Catholic and the Orthodox Churches in Poland.

- There is a long history of contacts between the Moscow Patriarchate and the Roman Catholic Church in Poland. Among Polish bishops there are sincere friends of the Russian Orthodox Church, for instance, the former Archbishop of Warsaw and Primate of Poland, Cardinal Jozef Glemp, who came to Russia on several occasion and met with Patriarchs Alexy II and Kirill. Certainly, His Holiness Patriarch Kirill's visit to Poland will serve as a great impetus for the development of relations between our two Churches. The Catholic Church in Poland advocates traditional Christian values in her country and in Europe as a whole. Suffice it to say that through the efforts of this Church's prelates, considerable

restrictions for abortion were introduced in Poland's legislation in 1993. Thus, Poland is a unique example of a European country in which the birth control policy has developed in the direction of hardening rather than liberalization, like in other member states of the European Union.

The stand taken by the Russian Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church in Poland on topical issues of today, such as individual morality and social ethics, bioethics, ethics of scientific research and some others, are very close, which makes it possible for the two Churches to develop cooperation, bearing joint witness to the Christian tradition in Europe. I would say the contemporary situation, which European countries have found themselves as a result of secularization, turns this opportunity into urgent necessity.

The Russian and Polish Orthodox Churches maintain close fraternal relations. We have a common history, common traditions, common views. In most parishes of the Polish Orthodox Church, the liturgy is celebrated in Church Slavonic, like in our churches.

The Primate of the Polish Orthodox Church, His Beatitude Metropolitan Sava of Warsaw and All Poland, has visited the Russian Orthodox Church on several occasions. In particular, he personally participated in the celebrations held on the occasion of the enthronement of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill on February 1, 2009. Metropolitan Sava attended the meeting of Primates and representatives of Local Orthodox Churches last November in Moscow.

Delegations of the Russian and Polish Orthodox Churches work together at inter-Orthodox events. They have common stands in the theological dialogue with non-Orthodoxy, including the Roman Catholic Church.

Hierarchs of the Polish Orthodox Church have often come to visit the Moscow Patriarchate. Thus, Archbishop Jeremiah of Wroclaw and Szeczin attended several international theological conferences held by the Synodal Biblical-Theological Commission. Archbishop Abel of Ljubljana and Holmes comes to the Blacherna Convent near Dmitrov, with its relics of Venerable Confessor Parasceva who spent her youth in a convent in what is Poland today. At Archbishop Abel's request, particles of the relics of saints whose life on earth was associated with Poland, including those of Parasceva, were transferred on several occasions to Poland for veneration in Orthodox churches. It is another testimony of our kinship.

It is a long tradition to exchange students of the theological schools of our two Churches. Indeed, many Polish hierarchs studied at Moscow and Leningrad Theological Academies. In the Russian Church, there are bishops and clergy, too, who attended the Christian Theological Academy in Warsaw.

The studies in the Orthodox Theological Seminary in Warsaw are held in Russian, which creates preconditions for close contacts with students and theologians of the Russian Orthodox Church. In 2008, a group of 20 young Polish theologians visited holy places in Russia, and in May 2011, during my visit to Poland, I had an occasion to visit the Warsaw Seminary and to meet with its students.

The youth work has been well established in the Polish Orthodox Church. There is a Brotherhood of Orthodox Youth in Poland, with organization of Orthodox youth pilgrimages as one of the most important areas of its work. The Brotherhood members have traditionally participated in pilgrimages to the Russian Church's holy places held annually during the international congress of the Fellowship of the Orthodox Youth.

Churches and monasteries in Poland have been visited by pilgrims from the Moscow Patriarchate's countries on annual basis. Thus, in December 2011, a 100-member pilgrims group led by Archbishop George of Nizhniy Novgorod and Arzamas and Bishop Veniamin of Penza and Kuznetsk came to

Poland to venerate the shrines of the Polish Orthodox Church.

Cooperation between our two Churches embraces various aspects of church life. So, it is impossible to tell about all of them within a short interview.

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