# Metropolitan Hilarion: the future of Orthodoxy depends on faithfulness to the church Tradition

*Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, head of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations and head of the Synodal Biblical and Theological Commission, gave in interview to the Bogoslov.ru portal. In a talk with the portal's editor-in-chief, Archpriest Pavel Velikanov, he explains his vision of the role his Commission plays and the place it occupies in today's life of the Church. He also speaks about theological problem facing the Orthodox Church today and the preparation and conduct of a Pan-Orthodox Council, as well as other topics.*

**Q. Your Eminence, on October 5, 2011, you were appointed as chairman of the Synodal Biblical and Theological Commission. It is you that the supreme leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church have chosen for a very delicate and manifold task to direct the work of the Church in the area of theology. We would like to know your vision of the role and place of the Commission in today's life of the Church. Is it planned to develop the Commission into something like 'a leading research institute' or 'an experts' council' or will it functions remain the same?**

A. In the first place I would like to stress that the Synodal Theological Commission and its chairman have never been set the task 'to direct the work of the Church in the area of theology'. Unlike, say, episcopal ministry, which is primarily the service of direction (1 Cor. 12:26-29) as well as preservation of the doctrinal and canonical Tradition, theological ministry is a special calling. What is required to fulfil it, along with faithfulness to the Church, is appropriate competence and ability to think theologically. Today we face the task not 'to direct theology' but to create conditions for the new generation of Orthodox theologians to develop these abilities.

By definition the Commission is not a theological research institution. It rather acts as an experts' council which, acting on the instruction of His Holiness the Patriarch and the Holy Synod, works on specific topics collegially formulating answers to posed question. This is its principal task.

As far as other forms and areas of the Commission's work are concerned, we propose to consider them

at the forthcoming plenary session.

**Q. Your Eminence, you are a theologian rightly recognized by the scientific communities both inside and outside Russia. In your view, what are the most acute theological problems facing the Orthodox Church as a whole today? Are there problems the solution to which really determines the future of Orthodoxy?**

A. Today's Orthodox Church preserves continuity with the apostolic Christian community and in this sense she is above all a Church of the Tradition. The future of Orthodoxy depends on faithfulness to the church Tradition – the tradition that the Church has preserved in diverse historical situations through centuries.

As opposed to some liberally-minded Christian communities, the Orthodox Church does not need any rethinking or re-interpretation of her doctrinal or moral teaching. And when ecclesiastical scholars, patrologists, historians, liturgists and representatives of other disciplines, in their studies encounter some problems, these problems do not concern doctrine as such but they are specific problems arising in any serious scholarship.

However, there is one really acute and pressing problem which is quite theological, that of church mission today. In this case it is a not a matter of church message, not what the Church preaches but what needs to be done to make church preaching intelligible and effective in today's situation. Indeed, theology is not only an in-depth study of the meaning of the Church's dogmatic and moral teaching. It is also a proclamation, a special way of proclaiming to the world and people the truths of the faith through various means. It is not without reason that Patriarch Nicephorus of Constantinople, a well-known defender of the veneration of icons, used the expression 'the melody of theology'.

Today we face the task to find such ways of expressing the church teaching as to enable us to give account of our hope to those around us who are still far from the Church or those who are on the way to it.

A particular part of this task is the work on the Catechesis carried out today under the Synodal Biblical and Theological Commission.

**Q. Recently there have been intensive discussions on the preparation and convening of a Pan-Orthodox Council. How intensively is this preparation process going? How do you see the role of the Biblical and Theological Commission in the preparation of this Council so**

**important for all Local Churches? Indeed, there is a whole number of questions, in particular the problem of primacy, which is solved in different ways precisely for the reason of differences in 'theological ways'?**

A. I have had to answer questions about the preparation of a Pan-Orthodox Council more than once. This preparation has been carried out for half a century now, sometimes intensifying, sometimes standing stock-still. Positions of Local Orthodox Church on a number of items on the agenda have been harmonized. Today we have revisited the question of what the Council should be, in the course of inter-Orthodox dialogue. And it should be said that this discussion is part of the conciliar process which can be crowned by the Council itself.

Pehaps, some disputable problems, on which consensus has not been reached as yet, should not be posed before the Council but rather be left for the future. It concerns also the problem of primacy in the Orthodox Church as well as related issues of the granting of autocephaly and the problem of diptychs.

As far as the problem of primacy is concerned, serious studies have been carried out on this theme by the Synodal Biblical and Theological Commission. On the basis of an historical, canonical and theological analysis, a document will be drafted which, after its approval by the Supreme Church Authority, will express the position of our Church.

**Q. The Biblical and Theological Commission as related to Russian theological schools is actually one that 'commissions' projects and personnel. In your view, what fields of theology experience the most acute shortage of specialists?**

A. The members of the Synodal Biblical and Theological Commission are authoritative and competent theologians and church scholars but as the need arises we involve experts in various fields including young theologians.

Among our researchers and specialists there are many people who are engaged in patristic studies, both Eastern and Western. This concern should be developed since reliance on the patristic heritage is an important and strong aspect of the modern Orthodox theology. It is insufficient though.

We still have few highly qualified specialists in canon law, an area in which the Russian church scholarship used to be up to the mark in the pre-revolutionary period.

Matters stand better in Bible studies. In the Commission, a biblical group has been set up, involving both members of the Commission and invited experts. Orthodox Bible studies however need to be developed. This requires not only consolidation of resources but cultivation of a new generation of scholars.

There is another need, of course, - the need for systemic theologians. To meet this need is not an easy task because it takes specialists not only with enormous erudition, not only theological at that, but also with a philosophical, general cultural and really systemic thinking and with a literary gift as well. At this stage we are still to reach the level of such Russian dogmatists as Metropolitan Makary (Bulgakov). I hope that in the gradual development of various theological disciplines we will see the emergence of people capable of offering theological works of systemic nature.

**Q. Speaking about theological academies and chairs of theology in secular universities, what is your vision of the calling of each of these academic schools so different structurally and administratively?**

A. The theological academic tradition is an integral part of the Russian higher theological education, I its core and solid foundation. The principal task of a theological academy is to cultivate highly educated clergy, hierarchs and pastors. And here we have not yet reached the pre-revolutionary level either, because at that time the academic education had a solid general scientific and general humanitarian component.

Theological units such as chairs, departments and faculties in secular universities represent a new experience but their emergence is dictated first of all by the tasks of religious education and mission facing the Church today. These units should be developed with the use of advantages they enjoy as to their status, that is, their being part of a university. This involvement does not only make it possible to restore and assert theology as a legitimate and integral part of education and culture; it also makes it possible for theology to enter into dialogue and cooperation with secular sciences, especially humanitarian ones. This will contribute to the development and enrichment of our theology and to its ability to speak with the world. In doing so, it is necessary of course that the so-called ‘secular theology’ should not lose living relations with the life of the Church. This danger does exist, and we should always remember it, because Orthodox theology outside the liturgy and spiritual life is doomed to become emasculated.

**Q. The Synodal Biblical and Theological Commission has come to prominence through theological conferences organized by the Russian Orthodox Church. They were attended by**

**the best theological scholars from all over the world. Will this tradition of holding such conferences continue or will the format of these conferences be changed?**

A. The tradition of holding international church-wide theological conferences will certainly continue. The papers of previous conferences constitute an important contribution to our theology and reflect the dynamics of its development. At present, a collection of papers from the latest conference on ‘Life in Christ: Christians Ethics, Ascetic Tradition of the Church and Challenges of the Modern Time’, which took place in November 2012, are in the press.

As for the format of the conferences and their thematic structure, changes are possible here. This matter will also be discussed at the plenary session of our Commission.

**Q. In conclusion, allow me, Your Eminence, to hear your wish to the editors, contributors and readers of the Bogoslov.ru website, precisely in your capacity as chairman of the Synodal Biblical and Theological Commission.**

A. I wish that the editors and contributors of the Bogoslov.ru portal always remember the responsibility placed on those who address the theological word to such a broad audience and steadily raise the scientific theological level of the materials it publishes. And to readers I wish that introduction to the portal’s materials help them not only to broaden their theological horizon but also assert them in their Orthodox faith.

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