



Patriarch Kirill's interview to Serbian newspaper 'Evening News'

On January 29, 2012, the Serbian newspaper 'Evening News' published an interview of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia.

Q. Your Holiness, as you know, Serbs in Kosovo and Metohija have recently appealed to President Medvedev to grant them Russian citizenship, and his answer is already known. The Serbs appealed to you as well, and their desire was dictated by despair and helplessness in the situation in which they have been caught. The recent initiatives of Serbs in Kosovo for Russian citizenship have given a powerful signal that should be heard not only in Russia but throughout Europe.

Your words have always been a great moral support for our people and country. What message could you convey to all the Serbian citizens, especially Orthodox faithful, and encourage them in this grave period of history?

A. The Serbs who live in Kosovo and Metohija have become hostages in a major political game. Given the indifferent attitude of many states, they are forced to stay in closed enclaves, experiencing everyday anxiety because of the hostile people around who are aware of their impunity. Our brothers in faith have a great courage not to abandon their much-suffering land and holy places and have to live like concentration camp inmates who are denied even the basic right to life. Here we see a glaring injustice, double standards and lies of the policy declaring commitment to the ideal of humanism and human rights protection while shutting its eye to the hell created by extremists with support from their foreign sponsors.

The Lord says to St. Paul, 'My power is made perfect in weakness' (2 Cor. 12:9). When all the human resources are exhausted, when there seem to be no hope, then we see the help of God about which the Lord told to his apostle. In Russian history we see many examples when the country was on the verge of enslavement and destruction - in the Time of Trouble in 1612, and during the Polish intervention, in 1812 when Napoleon's army invaded the country, and in 1941 when the Hitler's armadas advanced with lightning speed in the territory of the Soviet Union. Not once the enemy was close to his aim but contrary to the logical development, Russia hurled back those invasions and rose from ruins and ashes. In this the believer sees God's providence and His help.

I have no right to give any political advice to the Kosovo Serbs but will offer a counsel relevant in all

times: turn to the Lord God with sincere prayer for help. And your brothers and sisters in faith in Russia will lift up their prayers together with you, and I believe the whole Universal Church will do the same. In the Gospel, our Lord Jesus Christ repeats these words: 'Do not be afraid!' The fear of dangers and threats is a natural human feeling. But the Lord is always with us and He says to the Serbs in Kosovo today: 'Do not be afraid!'

I am deeply thankful to the Kosovo Serbs for their letter to me and to the Russian state leaders, to 'the Russian people and brothers'. Scores of thousands of people put their signatures under this letter. It has left no one of those who read it indifferent. Our hearts are deeply moved by the trust and love for Russia manifested in this letter. In response I would like to say: the Russian Church, the Orthodox Russian people will never turn away from you. No earthly gains, no changes in the current political situation will make us forget about our ages-old spiritual kinship.

Q. Russia, within her diplomatic and political resources, has given support to the Kosovo Serbs who have been caught in a difficult situation in all respects, socio-economic, legal, psychological. What support can the Serbs from Kosovo expect from the Russian Orthodox Church?

A. The Russian Federation has really given a considerable support to the Kosovo Serbs. For instance, by the decision of the Russian authorities, funds have been allocated through UNESCO for the restoration of ruined churches in Kosovo. This initiative deserves every encouragement. Other actions are taken as well to relieve the situation of our Serbian brothers who live in Kosovo, including the supply of humanitarian aid.

The Moscow Patriarchate has invariably supported the position taken by the Serbian Church with regard of the status of Kosovo. On the international arena, much was done for the protection of the Serbian population of the region by my predecessor, His Holiness Patriarch Alexy II. In particular, he devoted to this problem a considerable part of his address to the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly in 2007. I, too, will never stop making efforts for defending the Serbian brothers in their struggle to live in the land of their fathers.

It is very important that the holy places in Kosovo should not be abandoned. It would be a real spiritual catastrophe and would do a serious damage to Europe's Orthodox heritage. Priceless are the monuments created by the Serbian people in Kosovo and Metohija, and they are alive as long as prayers are lifted up in churches and the feat of monasticism is performed in monastery cells. I have approved the action program which will be implemented in 2012.

I have been to Kosovo several times and talked with local people and could see their difficult situation

with my own eyes. What I saw made a strong impression on me. The Russian Orthodox Church was and will be in solidarity with the Kosovo Serbs. Our compatriots empathize with them and lift up ardent prayers for a speedy regulation of life in the Kosovo region. There is my voice too among these numerous voices of prayer.

Q. How do you assess the new calls of some Montenegro politicians to divide the Serbian Orthodox Church? The former prime minister of Montenegro, Milo Jukanovic, has recently stated the history will show the validity of his call to divide the Serbian Church.

A. History shows that attempts of particular political forces to put pressure on the Church in order to change her canonical order lead to nothing good.

Fortunately, in Montenegro there are many reasonable political leaders who share this point of view. In February 2009, I met with Montenegrin President Philip Vujanovic. I remember that during that meeting Mr. Vujanovic said that for him the Metropolia of Montenegro and Primorje was the only Orthodox canonical institution in Montenegro and pointed to the importance of the Metropolia's taking pastoral care of the Serbs and Montenegrins.

All the Local Orthodox Churches consider Montenegro to be part of the canonical territory of the Serbian Patriarchate and this generally-shared Orthodox conviction should be respected.

Q. We know that representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church in their talks with representatives of the Vatican paid attention to the fact that it would be good for the Pope to voice and openly demand the protection of monuments and Christians themselves in Kosovo. The then Pope did not listen to the wise advice from Moscow. Is the situation changing in this respect with the coming of a new Pope?

A. When the discussion on the Kosovo problem began, the Pope Benedict XVI of Rome, as is known, took a well-considered stand on this problem. The Holy See still refrains from an official recognition of this part of Serbia as an independent state. Moreover, on the eve of the declaration of the independence of Kosovo, the Pope called the international community not to hurry to make the final decision on the status of that territory, emphasizing that the Orthodox monasteries there have a special historical and spiritual significance for the Serbs.

Exactly four days after the declaration of Kosovo's independence in February 2008, Benedict XVI received in audience the Serbian ambassador to the Holy See. In the course of the meeting, the Pope underscored that the Serbs suffered much in the conflicts of the last decades and expressed concern for their situation in Kosovo. Since then he has repeatedly spoken for the protection of the rights of the

Serbian minority.

Q. How will you explain the fact that Western Christians, that is, Catholics, did not show desire to defend old Orthodox, that is Christian, churches in Kosovo? These churches were burnt down and destroyed exactly at the time when Western peace-makers came in Kosovo?

A. Regrettably, the Western world, during the intervention of the NATO troops in the territory of former Yugoslavia, was subjected to a massive information attack and, to a considerable extent, was misled. For long months, the Western mass media played up deliberately distorted information about 'the atrocity of Milosevic's regime' committed against Kosovo Serbs, grossly exaggerating the number of victims of 'ethnic cleansings' carried out by the Serbian police in the region.

However, the hostilities themselves in Kosovo provoked in the Western Christian world a reaction far from unequivocal. Many Christians in the West were outraged by the inscription 'Happy Easter!' on bombs made by the American military.

Nevertheless, a number of Catholic bishops did come out in support of Kosovo's autonomy, motivated by hopes for an improvement in the life of the Catholic community in the region, which were not to become true.

Other representatives of Western Christian churches and communities have repeatedly expressed concern for the vandalism of NATO's military and for Albanian militants with their extremist attitude to the old shrines in Kosovo. Therefore, I believe, the Western Christians as a whole should not be blamed for the actions of the military. These actions were not dictated by religious beliefs.

Q. Many newspapers have recently reported on your possible meeting with Pope Benedict XVI. Do you still insist that all the disputed questions should be resolved first, because otherwise this meeting is meaningless?

A. Yes, I still believe that for this meeting to be a success it is necessary, if not settle the conflict problems in full, but at least to try to settle them more energetically.

The mass media have stressed only the sensational aspect of a possible meeting, but I do not like it at all to be reduced to sensational. To make it really beneficial for the further development of relations between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church it is necessary to radically improve the atmosphere of these relations through joint efforts for settling the problems existing in our relations.

Q. Under the former Pope, representatives of the Vatican often said they could not influence the Greek Catholics in Ukraine who captured Orthodox churches. Has the situation changed now or things have remained the same?

A. While stressing their loyalty to the see of Rome, the Ukrainian Greek Catholics have insisted on their own autonomy. When in 1990 a quadruple commission was set up including the Vatican, Moscow Patriarchate, Ukrainian Orthodox Church and Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, in order to settle the situation in western Ukraine, the Greek Catholics actually wrecked its work. We have recently suggested that this commission be resumed but the Catholic side has been perfectly indifferent to our proposal.

In the course of regular contacts with leaders of the Roman Catholic Church, we have continually raised the question concerning the need to resolve the situation with regard to Orthodox churches in western Ukraine. Both the Pope of Rome and heads of respective Vatican congregations have expressed appreciation of our concern but the problem remains unresolved.

Q. The Russian Patriarch and the Pope were supposed to meet in 1997 in Graz, Austria. Ten days before the meeting, they in the Vatican deleted the part of the document to be signed concerning the harm of proselytism and conflict between the Orthodox and the Uniates in Ukraine. Since the 90s, Catholic churches have been opened in more than 200 Russian cities. Have the positions of Moscow and the Vatican become closer when proselytism is discussed now, or everything has remained the same?

A. It should be noted that the situation in the Orthodox-Catholic relations in Russia have noticeably improved in the last 10 years. The problem of proselytism is not as acute now as it was in the 90s when Catholic missionaries came to Russia to carry out their active work here. A positive role has been played by the Joint Group for Considering Problems in Relations between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church in Russia, which was set up in 2004. It has become a good platform for an open and honest discussion between representatives of the two Churches on concrete complicated problems and for a joint work to make recommendations for their solution.

It is necessary to develop cooperation between the Orthodox and the Catholics who have been guardians of the Christian tradition and who have similar views of personal and social ethics, scientific and technological progress, bioethics and other issues of today. Among the problems which have become increasingly relevant is Christianophobia, the persecution of Christians for their faith. In the area of the protection of the rights of Christians, I believe close Orthodox-Catholic cooperation to be promising, important and timely.

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