Interview by Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk to the UNIAN-Religion Ukrainian Agency

Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, spoke of relations with the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church in his interview to the UNIAN-Religion.

The head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church Archbishop Sviatoslav (Shevchuk) often speaks of the need for dialogue with the Russian Orthodox Church and a possible meeting with Patriarch Kirill. Who is the initiator of this dialogue? Under what conditions is it possible and what would be its aims?

Immediately after the election of Archbishop Sviatoslav (Shevchuk) as the head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church I sent a letter of congratulations to him and expressed the hope that relations between the Orthodox of the Moscow Patriarchate and Greek Catholics in Ukraine would improve. We were uplifted by certain optimism when Archbishop Sviatoslav responded with the desire to solve jointly the problems which exist between the Moscow Patriarchate and the UGCC.
At the same time we cannot but be concerned by the declaration of the new head of the UGCC that believers belonging to the 'Kievan Patriarchate' are the 'main Orthodox brothers' of the Ukrainian Greek Catholics. The close contacts and even concelebration of Archbishop Sviatoslav (Shevchuk) with representatives of this schismatic structure, not recognized by any of the other Orthodox Churches, unfortunately demonstrates a willingness to ignore the official position of the Moscow Patriarchate and disrespect for the canonical rules of the Orthodox Church.

I am deeply convinced that genuine mutual understanding and reconciliation between our Churches is impossible to achieve without mutual respect, including respect in the field of canonical order.

We have recently received alarming reports of instances of proselytism by Greek Catholics among the Orthodox on the territories of Central and Eastern Ukraine. This type of thing can only make worse the problems that already exist in inter-church relations, while at the same time we would prefer words about the desire for dialogue to be in accord with real deeds.

The appearance of a representative of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church at the enthronement of the new head of the UGCC has been regarded as symbolic. In one of his comments His Holiness Patriarch Kirill noted a 'recent improvement in relations between the Orthodox and Greek Catholic Churches in Ukraine.' What did he have in mind?

After the election of the new archbishop of the UGCC official contacts were instituted between the Greek Catholics and the Orthodox of the Moscow Patriarchate for practically the first time. You mentioned the presence of a representative of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church at the enthronement of Archbishop Sviatoslav (Shevchuk). There was then a meeting between His Beatitude Metropolitan Vladimir of Kiev and All Ukraine and the head of the UGCC. This meeting took place in an atmosphere of good will, and during it agreement was reached on co-operation between places of learning of the two Churches. It is these positive events that His Holiness had in mind when he spoke of an 'improvement in relations between the Orthodox and Greek Catholic Churches in Ukraine'.
The Patriarch's words, however, do not mean that all the problems in relations between the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church have now been regulated. There still remain unresolved questions concerning the building of Orthodox churches in Western Ukraine, and representatives of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church express concern with regard to the mission of Greek Catholics in Eastern Ukraine.

The UGCC has a strategic goal in Ukraine – to obtain from the Vatican recognition of Patriarchal status for its organizational structure. In November and December of this year the UGCC created in Ukraine three new metropolias: Lvov, Ivano-Frankovsk and Ternopil and Zboriv. Now the UGCC has seven metropolias, including the metropolia of Przemyśl and Warsaw in Poland, the metropolia of Philadelphia in the USA and the metropolia of Winnipeg in Canada. Does the strengthening of the position of the UGCC on the canonical territory of the Moscow Patriarchate influence the development of relations between the Russian Orthodox Church and the UGCC?

The transformation of the Greek Catholic dioceses in Western Europe into metropolias is primarily the internal business of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church. At the same time this administrative reform has been made with the aim of obtaining form the Vatican recognition for the UGCC the status of patriarchate, as the Greek Catholic bishops themselves openly admit. It is well known that not only the Moscow Patriarchate, but also the other Local Orthodox Churches view negatively the possibility that the UGCC may be recognized as a patriarchate. Such recognition would be an indirect affirmation of Archbishop Sviatoslav's declaration that the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church is the sole legitimate heir of the ancient Kievan Metropolia.

Moreover, the status of patriarchate would give to the UGCC the character of an all-Ukrainian Church. However, Central and Eastern Ukraine has always traditionally been Orthodox territory where there never have been any Greek Catholic structures. Of course, the Orthodox are alarmed at the UGCC's aim to spread its mission to the East by creating new dioceses and exarchates there.

At the beginning of November in Kazan there was a joint procession of the cross between believers of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church. Educated Orthodox youth are attracted by Catholicism in other countries, while Catholic ecumenists come here. For example, to mark the New Year there will be a youth meeting of Taizé in Berlin attended by a large inter-confessional delegation from Ukraine. Is there not a danger for Orthodox Christians in this type of communion? What sort of communion is permitted and what is not?

Orthodox youth, including that of the Russian Church, for many years now has participated in youth meetings organized by the monastic community of Taizé in various European cities. I am glad that young Christians have the chance to meet and share their experience of life and ministry in the Church as this type of communion can lay the foundations for the building of a more just and human society.

Although between the Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church there is no unity in the faith and communion in the sacraments, nevertheless the Orthodox and Catholics hold positions close to each other on many questions of contemporary life, primarily in the social sphere and sphere of ethics. Orthodox-Catholic co-operation is developing today in various forms. This may be joint cultural projects, public acts, and active mutual engagement at the level of international organizations. Positive examples of such co-operation already exist, and youth meetings are one of them.

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