



Metropolitan Hilarion: Recommendations on general Orthodox themes made by some Churches cannot be binding upon the others

The Primates and hierarchs of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem and the Church of Cyprus met in Istanbul on 1-3 September 2011. Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations (DECR) commented on the meeting results in his interview to 'Izvestia' newspaper. The interview was published on 7 September 2011.

Q. – Does the meeting of the Primates of some Churches without invitation of others, for instance, the Russian Orthodox Church, mean that there are the leading and subordinate Churches?

A. – There are fifteen Local Orthodox Churches, and none of them takes the lead. There are no first-rate or second-rate Churches; and no Church can dictate anything to the other. This reminds of a principle of confederation: each autocephalous Church is independent in its administration, but stays in prayerful and canonical communion with all other Orthodox Churches.

The Orthodox Church differs from the Catholic Church. We have neither Pope, nor first bishop who could take decisions for all. The Patriarch of Constantinople has a title of Ecumenical Patriarch, but is the first among the equals. The meeting in Istanbul on 1-3 September was not a Pan-Orthodox, but a regional meeting discussed at which was a very complicated situation in the Middle East: Christians are discriminated and persecuted in certain countries of the region.

Q. – Should one expect an invitation of the Moscow Patriarchate to such meetings?

A. – I believe that the Moscow Patriarchate's presence at all Pan-Orthodox meetings is obligatory, but any group of Churches can meet at their discretion to solve regional problems. As the Patriarch of Jerusalem told me in our talk, they are entitled to discuss any matters of interest. Yet, decisions and recommendations on Pan-Orthodox topics made at such meetings cannot be binding for other Churches.

Q. – Is the holding of the Pan-Orthodox Council real? Reports appear that the Moscow Patriarchate blocks decisions of pre-Council conferences, thus demonstrating its exclusive right to determine the

development of the world Orthodoxy. Are these reports valid?

A. – The process of preparing the Holy and Great Council lasts for over fifty years. The time of its holding depends of when we get ready. Reports that the Moscow Patriarchate blocks many decisions of pre-Council conferences are absolutely groundless, as the Russian Orthodox Church comes out in favour of the Council. However, we have always insisted on the necessity of strict adherence to the principle of consensus both during the process of preparation and at the Council. Position of one or several Churches should not be disregarded at voting.

Q. – Yet, a communiqué issued on the results of the meeting on September 1-3 contains a proposal to reconsider procedural rules for the pre-Council conferences in order to recede from the principle of consensus...

A. – I was surprised at this proposal. In this case, the mechanisms created during fifty years could be wrecked, and the unity of world Orthodoxy could be jeopardized. We have obtained the adherence to this principle in the World Council of Churches that includes not only the Orthodox, but also the Protestant Churches. The more so, we must keep it within our own family, and the Council will not become the cause of a new schism, which many our believers fear, but will be a factor of unity, consolidating positions of the Orthodox Church in the contemporary world. We have already reached agreement on eight topics that can be put on the Council's agenda.

Q. – What kind of topics?

A. – For instance, there are topics of church calendar, the unification of church decrees, fasting, impediments to marriage, the attitude of Orthodoxy to the rest of Christian world and ecumenism. There is also a topic of the procedure of granting church autonomy and the question of the Orthodox Churches' attitude to political and social realities in the contemporary world.

As to the other questions, for instance, the procedure of granting autocephaly (complete independence), I am confident that given good will, the Churches will come to an agreement before long. This can be done even after the Council.