



THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

Department for External Church Relations

Patriarch Kirill addresses grand meeting held on occasion of 65th anniversary of Department for External Church Relations

A grand meeting devoted to the 65th anniversary of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations took place on July 24, 2011 at the Danilovsky Hotel. His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia delivered the following address:

"Your Eminences,

Esteemed Sergey Yevgenyevich,

Dear Fathers, Brothers and Sisters,

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I have a very special attitude to the service carried out by the Department for External Church Relations, at least because I headed it for 20 years. I have been involved in the external church work since 1968 when on the threshold of the so-called Prague Spring, I, a 21 year-old youth, was sent by our Church as a youth delegate to the Christian Peace Congress in Prague. Since that time I have been closely connected with the external work of the Church and remain connected with it today now due to my new powers and responsibilities.

I should say that the Department has always played a special role. It is our oldest synodal department. The very idea of its foundation belongs to the 1017-1918 Local Council. At that time, there were very high expectations about interreligious and inter-confessional dialogue and the Russian Church led by His Holiness Patriarch Tikhon took an active part in that work. The Council ruled to set up a special commission to deal with inter-confessional relations but for well-known reasons neither this commission nor many other structures decreed by that remarkable Council were ever established. As a result, the

Church managed to establish a Department for External Church Relations as late as 1946 after she achieved a somewhat conditional normalization of her relations with the Soviet state.

Metropolitan Nikolay (Yarushevich) of Krutitsy and Kolomna, the right hand of Patriarch Alexis I, was assigned to lead the Department. First it was quite a small establishment but already at that time it managed to accumulate outstanding personnel. Those were people related to the Russian emigration and those who had an excellent education they had received in pre-revolutionary schools and who had some experience of church administrative work already in the new time.

Since that time the Department, which actually remained the only really competent church institution, has incorporated the best talents of the Russian Church in the 40s, 50s, 60s, 70s, 80s, 90s and 2000s. It was so because the Church realized that the department was a place where something important was carried out from the point of view of both the interests of the Church which at that time had to live in a difficult situation of an atheistic state and the solution of real problems on the level of inter-Orthodox relations and the need to strengthen the presence of the Russian Orthodox Church in the world through establishing parishes and dioceses.

A little later there emerged problems of inter-confessional relations, which at the time of the Cold War were broader than what then was called ecumenical issues. It was on the platform of the World Council of Church that the two worlds encountered each other and did it not in a situation of ideological confrontation which prevailed everywhere, be it the United Nations or regional organizations or any inter-governmental commissions. At that time the ideological factor defined political decisions made by the both sides, and now on the platform of the World Council of Church in the situation of cold war, people who lived in difference systems united declaring in the first place that they had much more things in common than things dividing them – their common faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Today it may seem to some that it was one of the clever moves of Soviet propaganda and a certain unsound action by the Russian Church. Actually it was a certain miracle of God, when in spite of the divided Europe and the divided world, Christians who belonged to different confessions could meet fully aware that though each was influenced by his own political context they could form a common agenda, in which a considerable place was given to concern for human rights and people's right to religious freedom.

I believe it was the participation of the Russian Orthodox Church in inter-confessional work, in the work of the World Council of Churches and other inter-confessional organizations that helped to a considerable extent to stop that hand of the persecutors. It should not be forgotten that the Soviet Union rulers sought to show their people and perhaps to the whole world that region was a thing of the past, that it died off remaining for a time being a place for elderly uneducated people, that the Church and

progress, science, education and culture had nothing in common, that the Church was just a temporarily tolerable archaic institution. But since it played a certain role in helping elderly people and giving them consolation, it had to be tolerated in society for a while.

I will never forget a conversation I had with a functionary of the Council for Religious Affairs soon after I was dismissed as rector of the Leningrad Theological Academy and sent to Smolensk. As was a custom at that time, I had to visit the Council for Religious Affairs, and the functionary, who on the whole seemed to be quite a reasonable man, suddenly began to speak in quite a different language. He said: 'You as one who is accustomed to deal with international affairs should get over yourself and realize why the Soviet government still tolerates the Church. It does so because it understands that for some part of the elderly uneducated section of our society the Church indirectly has some positive sense because they do not attend clubs or community centers; they live alone at home and for them the Church is a consolation, a toy. But you should not see in your church work any future. There is no future to the Church in the Soviet Union'. Thus encouraged I left for Smolensk.

We all know what came out in reality. And the external church work played a very important role in preventing the point of view I have just related from becoming prevalent among the ruling elite of the Soviet Union. Many began to say that the Church was not engaged with old people alone, comforting them; she also struggled for peace and helped to establish good relations between nations and this at a time when the USSR stood in the great need of making the peace mission more effective. And through this external work, through establishing relations with many confessions and with a great number of governmental and non-governmental organizations the Church created a powerful system of support for her efforts to overcome the oppression practiced in the Soviet Union at that time.

I speak in so much detail about this precisely because our stand on these issues has sometimes been criticized, especially by those who did not assume any pro-active stand in the Church at that time; they were either lay people or came to the Church at a time when there was no risk of being a believer. It is precisely these people who often criticise the work of the Department for External Church Relations and all that was done in that fateful time. But it is quite clear that the freedom of the Church was in many ways prepared by the selfless efforts of the clergy, theologians and our lay intellectuals who worked at the DECR at that difficult time.

I would like to mention with special gratitude the names of the late chairmen of the Department: Metropolitan Nikolay (Yarushevich), who was the first head of this synodal structure, and Metropolitan Nikodim of Leningrad and Novgorod, who involved me in external church work. Today we sang 'Eternal Memory' to them. We remember the feat performed by these deceased hierarchs and their efforts for improving the Russian Church's relations with the whole Christendom, with many confessions and monotheistic religions. Through their efforts Moscow became a real world inter-religious center. All this

could not but had a great importance for changing the internal situation in our country and made a positive influence on the formation of our elite. I am convinced that these influences have not been fruitless.

We should also remember the living Metropolitan Juvenaly and Metropolitan Filaret who at that difficult time made their own contribution to the development and strengthening of the external work of our Church.

Having become the chairman of the DECR, I picked up that baton. At the same time, there were new tasks and new issues and it was important that the DECR reinforced that part of its work which dealt with relations with the authorities, public, political parties, which began to develop at that time, with social movements and trade unions. Thus the Department became a place of the Church's meeting with the civil society and the political world, also during the dramatic days in August 1991 and October 1993.

It was here, in the Department, that the ideas emerged about the need to develop the educational, catechetical and missionary work as well as relations with the Armed Forces and the mass media and to engage in social work. All these activities were carried out in a rudimentary form by the DECR. In the early 90s, the Department set up respective sections which were the ones who developed a general concept of reviving all this manifold church work and prepared the establishment of respective work structures.

The Department for External Church Relations was the unit which formed the agendas and trained personnel for such institutions as Department for Social Service and Charity, Department for Religious Education, Mission Department, Department for Cooperation with the Armed Forces and Law Enforcement and Information Department. As is known, the first information structure of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Communication Service, was established in the early 90s in the DECR.

After certain changes took place in the supreme church leadership in 2009, several sections of the DECR were made independent synodal departments whose work is well known today. These are the Department for Church-Society Relations and the Information Department. It is my deep conviction that the historical role of the DECR, which has been manifested in the establishment of a new administrative system in our Church and in defining the work plan in the areas where some efforts were made earlier, is very important. Historical credit for it belongs to all those who have worked in the Department for all these 65 years.

I would like to give his due to each, living and dead, for his work and to express hope that the memory of our outstanding predecessors who worked in the Department will live forever. Many of them were incredibly gifted and informed people whose abilities exceeded those of the average Soviet intellectual

and who stood out for their absolutely outstanding talents even among the most educated people of that time. They all made their own contribution to the cause of the Church and I am deeply convinced that they prepared the good transformations which happened in the life of the country and the Church.

Today the agenda of the DECR has been narrowed down because there are special synodal departments to deal with concerns which used to be in the jurisdiction of the DECR. At the same time, it should be emphasized that the importance of the DECR has not decreased. Today more attention is given to inter-Orthodox relations, which is important because, on the one hand, all the Orthodox Church are united in one faith, but on the other, they have lived in a comparative isolation from each other for a long time. And when a process of regular contacts between Local Orthodox Churches began in the 1960s it turned out that we had differences in some part of the tradition. This concerns first of all the canonical tradition and the tradition of governance, and these differences have led in recent years to conflicts, sometimes acute ones. Today we are entering a period when we realize that even the fact of a certain difference in the application of canons cannot be a reason for a refusal to work together. We should work together so that the whole Orthodox Church may bear her witness before the world and carry out her service in a dignified way.

In addition, the Department has another important function, which is to maintain cooperation with governments and governmental bodies in other countries, with intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations. And there is another enormous area of work, of course, which is work with our expatriates.

Today the Department for External Church Relations is working effectively. There is a new generation of workers. The Department is headed today by His Eminence Hilarion, who is celebrating his 45th birthday along with the anniversary of the Department. For this reason, dear Metropolitan, I would like to wish you and your staff that you may multiply the best traditions of the Department and preserve it as an intellectual spiritual center, so that it may be of prestige for our young people to join the Department, so that the most educated people with a broad outlook and ability to defend the interests of the Church at the remotest outposts may come to the Department. And to you I wish God's help and prosperity.

It is important that the intellectual component of the Department should be enlarged so that the system of dialogue with governmental and non-governmental institutions may develop and we may make progress beneficial for both the Church and the Fatherland”.