



## **Metropolitan Hilarion: Russian and Serbian people are tied by Orthodox faith**

On April 5, 2011, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, head of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations, met with Radio Russia correspondent T. Blokhin, who asked the metropolitan to tell the listeners of the Radio Russia Serbian Service about his visit to Belgrade.

During his visit to Belgrade from March 31-April 2, Metropolitan Hilarion met with Serbian President Boris Tadic, Patriarch Iriney of Serbia, some members of the Serbian Church's Holy Synod, as well as Serbian Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic and other officials.

Besides, people in Belgrade had an opportunity to hear Metropolitan Hilarion's oratorio 'Passions According to St. Matthews' performed during the concert of Russian church music at the Kolarac concert hall organized with the help of the Foreign Ministry and the Serbian Patriarchate. The DECR chairman also celebrated the Divine Liturgy at the Rakovica Monastery, the burial place of His Holiness Patriarch Paul of Serbia.

Metropolitan Hilarion said, in particular:

'I have been to the Serbian land many times, also during the hardest years when Serbia was subjected to NATO bombings. Perhaps it was the most memorable visit to Serbia for me: the whole sky of Belgrade was made into bars by aircraft which took off every five minutes from Hungary to drop bombs on the Serbian capital city.

I accompanied then His Holiness Patriarch Kirill, who at that time was chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations and who was on a peace mission designed to persuade the Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic to make certain steps to stop this invasion and to settle the problem by peaceful means. Unfortunately, the delegation, which included representatives of various countries, failed to persuade Milosevic to accept the proposed plan, but the very fact of that mission shows that the Russian Orthodox Church has always given importance to a peaceful settlement

in the Balkans.

Another testimony to it was a visit by the late Patriarch Alexy II to Serbia, when he and Patriarch Paul of Serbia together celebrated the Divine Liturgy at St. Sava's Cathedral which was under construction".

Among the topics discussed during Metropolitan Hilarion's meeting with the Serbian president an important place was given to the interior decoration of St. Sava's. In his talk with Mr. Tadic, who also heads the Public Council for its construction, Metropolitan Hilarion reconfirmed the readiness of the Russian Orthodox Church and Russian business community to take part in this project. His Eminence was asked about the contribution that Russia and the Moscow Patriarchate could make to the implementation of the project. Metropolitan Hilarion answered:

"St. Sava's Cathedral is one of the most magnificent Orthodox churches in the world and the largest one in the Balkans. And it is certainly important that its interior decoration should match its magnificence. The Serbian side has proposed to decorate the entire cathedral with mosaics, and this in total amounts to 17 000 square meters. It is an unprecedented project in its scale, involving enormous costs. If 1 square meter costs about 2 or 2, 5 thousand euros, the total project will take some 40 million euros.

Very serious efforts will be needed to raise these funds. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin have confirmed on several occasions the readiness of the Russian side to take part in the financing of this project.

During my recent visit, I looked at the interior decoration plan and saw that the designing of mosaics was still at a very early stage. I was shown only two volumes of specifications out of the planned four and they only describe what iconographic stories will be presented at which place. I saw no specific examples in these plans. It is bad, on one hand, because the very process of designing will take a certain time thus putting off the beginning of assemblage work. On the other hand, there is an ample opportunity for elaborating a design which will meet all the demands. The point is that the mosaics are planned to be executed in Byzantine style but the understanding of what it is differs very much today.

In Russia and other countries under the pastoral care of the Russian Orthodox Church, there are a lot of qualified specialists and masters today who can elaborate this project and take part in it personally. It should be remembered that for the last twenty years we have built and restored over 25 000 churches. This work involved interior mosaic decoration in some cases. We have specialists in this field and we are ready of course to share the experience we have accumulated".

Speaking about the situation in Kosovo and Metochia, Metropolitan Hilarion recalled that "with the connivance of the international community Kosovo saw events revealing grave violations of human

rights. Vivid evidence to it is the situation where the Orthodox Serbian population, with tacit consent of Western powers, was actually driven away from its native land and many Orthodox churches in Kosovo were destroyed”.

He also spoke about the restoration of Orthodox places in Kosovo which were damaged or destroyed by vandals. The Russian State participates in this program carried out under the aegis of UNESCO. He said:

“While in Kosovo I had an opportunity to see with my own eyes some churches lying in ruins. There is a program carried out today under the aegis of UNESCO to restore some of the ruined shrines. Under this program, the Russian Federation has decided to earmark 2 million dollars for the restoration of churches. One million has already been transferred and the second one is to be allocated this year.

But I think it cannot be the limit. It is very important indeed that the presence of Orthodox monks and nuns should be retained in the Serbian monasteries which live in hostile environment and which can soon see the lifting of security provided by international peace forces”.

The DECR chairman said he believed it an erroneous decision to hand over the protection of Orthodox monasteries in Kosovo and Metochia from international forces to local authorities:

“There are serious fears that people will be afraid of coming to these monasteries and so fewer and fewer monks and nuns will remain in them. Actually, these holy places live a normal life until monastic presence is preserved there. Therefore, we are ready on our part to send our monastics so that they may serve there at least ‘in shifts’ thus expressing solidarity and helping our Serbian brothers and sisters who have found themselves in so difficult a situation.

I have very serious doubts that Kosovo Albanians will be able to provide security for Serbian monks in monasteries in Kosovo. Everyone could see the lawlessness that went on in Kosovo until recently. The crimes committed there are still investigated. Therefore, it would be very much desirable if international forces continued safeguarding old Christian holy places in Kosovo and Metochia until the situation is stabilized”.

As the year 2014 will mark the centenary of the beginning of World War I, the problem of preserving the memory of Russian troops who died in those years in the Balkans becomes ever more topical. During his visit to Belgrade, Metropolitan Hilarion said together with Patriarch Irinej the Office for the Dead at the memorial to Russian soldiers who were killed in Serbia during World War I. Speaking about the fraternal bonds tying the Russian and Serbian people, Metropolitan Hilarion said:

“It is the Orthodox faith that has bound us throughout history. The Russian people have repeatedly shown, also by shedding their blood, their readiness not only to protect their own interests but also to defend fraternal nations. And the Russian army burial places in the Serbian soil are a very vivid testimony to it. Particularly, the memorial at which we prayed together with Patriarch Irinej is erected over the common grave of Russian troops who were killed during World War I. This is a memorial not only to those who were killed in action in Serbia but also to the two million Russian soldiers who were killed in the 1914-1917 war. As far as I know, it is the only memorial of this kind.

It is very important that these burial places should be kept in good order to keep the memory of sacrifices made at that tragic time”.

In conclusion of the interview, Metropolitan Hilarion took up again the situation in Kosovo and Metochia, stressing that the service of priests and monks in churches and monasteries in Kosovo is a feat of confession of faith necessary for preserving these old Orthodox holy places for generations to come. “They can be preserve only as long as there will be a living presence of people, monastics and clergy, ready to sacrifice their confort and security for it”, he said. He expressed the wish that all the Serbs who live in Kosovo today have courage and patience and expressed hope that the situation there would be normalized and those who had to leave their home would be able to gradually return to them.

*DECR Communication Service*