



This interview of His Eminence Metropolitan of Volokolamsk Hilarion was given to the Greek journalist Peggy Dokou - (For local TV Channel OMEGA in Rhodes).

· Your Eminence, I should first welcome you to Greece. It is very big honor for all of us that you are on Rhodes Island although it is not an official visit. What brings you here?

Here, in Rhodes currently there is an Orthodox – Catholic Forum which brings together participants from all European Orthodox Churches as well as from various Churches and Organizations in Europe. The idea of the creation of this Forum initially belongs to Cardinal Erdö of Budapest and to me. The idea is that we should informally discuss various questions of common interest. The first Forum, which took place in Trento (Italy) two years ago, discussed family issues such as marriage, procreation, abortion, the value of human life and so on. This meeting is dedicated to the relations between the church and the state in various European countries.

· In Greece there are still problems in these relations. Certainly, things are different in your country. Do you think that a constructive relation is necessary for both sides to coexist?

In Russia over the last 20 years we have developed very good and constructive relations between the church and the state. They are based on two principles. One is the mutual non-interference of either the church in state affairs or the state in internal church affairs. And another principle is collaboration in all fields in which such collaboration is necessary and welcome. And we believe that the harmonious application of these two principles will secure good relations between the church and the state and will help to solve many problems that exist currently.

· How do you think that this model of a good collaboration between the church and the state can work in European countries?

I think collaboration between the church and the state is essential for the benefit of the people. But in every country there is a different situation –and also every country has a different history from the histories of other countries. And I think the legislation regarding the relationship between churches and states should be peculiar to every country. There can be no universal model because all models have to take into account history and also the percentage of the faithful of the particular church.

· Your Eminence, in Europe we are watching in recent years an ‘attack’ on the churches and the religious factor from the atheists. We saw that people wanted Christian symbols to be removed from public areas such as the courts or even schools. What is your opinion about it?

I think it is a crime to remove Christian symbols from the public spheres in Europe. Europe has been and will remain a Christian continent. With all respect to all other faiths which exist and have existed for centuries in Europe, this continent is indeed a Christian continent where the majority of the population belong to various Christian churches. The removal of the Christian symbols from the public spheres is a great offence to Christianity and to each Christian in particular. We Christians do not mind when we come to a Muslim country where they have Muslim symbols exhibited in all public corners. And if we want to respect our Muslim brothers and sisters as well as representatives of other religions we have to do it on a mutual basis. When we speak about the building of the mosques in Europe for example, or minarets in Switzerland, we must also discuss such issues as the building of churches in Saudi Arabia or the situation of the Christian population in Iraq or in Afghanistan. We can not only go forward in further respecting Muslims in Europe without asking them to respect the rights of Christians in other parts of the world. Another thing is that when people say that because public spheres are open to anybody therefore there should be no symbols of any religion this should be regarded as a false argument because atheism is not a common eliminator of all religions. On the contrary, religions can coexist peacefully with one another as the experience of Russia shows for many centuries. We had a Muslim population for many centuries and we had no problems, no religious wars and Christians, Muslims, Jews and Buddhists lived peacefully in one country. And nobody demanded from the others that they remove their religious symbols. For me a Muslim religious symbol present in social services is not an offence. And I believe that for Muslims or Jews or Buddhists, Christian symbols are not a matter of concern. They are only a matter of concern to atheists and agnostics. But they also have the wrong symbols and let them exhibit these symbols if they wish in the public sphere. Christianity was not created only for private use. Christianity was created by Jesus Christ himself so that it can be felt in the public sphere. The Christian Church has a missionary imperative to go and teach the people and to baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. And for this mission it needs the public arena.

But the atheists and the agnostics are still a minority in most of the European countries as well as countries like yours and mine where the official religion is the Orthodox Christianity. How will the churches and the faithful tolerate these ‘minorities’ who try to impose their will on the majority?

We do not want to impose our religious world view on anybody. But we do not accept that atheism or the atheist approach should be imposed on religious people worldwide. We believe that the presence of religious symbols in the social services is an important feature of democracy and of the freedom of

conscience. For example you are wearing a cross and you are free to do so in Greece. But if you come to Great Britain you might be asked to hide it. I remember the situation when in Soviet times school children were not allowed to wear crosses - even under a T-shirt. I don't think we should return to such situation in contemporary Europe. If we speak about the freedom of conscience, it also includes the freedom of publicly expressing faith. And the public expression of faith means that you may wear the cross if you wish and that you may put the cross in your school class if you are a school teacher and so on. And there should be no way to remove Christian symbols from the public schools or any other public spaces. This is part of the notion of tolerance.

· Let's talk about the relations between the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Moscow Patriarchate. We see that they have improved considerably in recent years. Do you find it essential not only for the relations between the Patriarchates but also for the Orthodox people –especially in Balkans?

The relations between the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Moscow Patriarchate have improved quite considerably in recent years and even months. This was due to the efforts of both Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and the Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople. They simply decided that we should move from a situation of competition and confrontation to a situation of trust and mutual collaboration. This does not mean that all the problems have been solved. We for example have not yet come to an agreement on the situation in Estonia which provoked a deep crisis between the two Patriarchates in 1996. But we are commonly working towards solving this problem. And I think in any event the collaboration between the first Orthodox Patriarchate and the largest Orthodox Patriarchate is essential for the benefit of the entire Orthodox Church. Therefore we are glad to note that there has been this considerable improvement in the situation and we are also glad to work together for the preparation of the Great and Holy Council of the Orthodox Church which, following what Patriarch Bartholomew has said, will take place within two or three years.

· In Constantinople the Orthodox element is eliminated. What should the two Patriarchates do to protect the Orthodox flock? As we all know, Constantinople is not Christian anymore, it belongs to Turkey and the problems are still on for the minorities. What is your opinion?

First of all I think we should express solidarity, and not only in words but also in deeds, with Christian minorities worldwide. And then particular with Orthodox minorities who live in the Middle East, who live in Turkey and who live in other places where historically they constitute the majority but for various reasons – including demographic reasons- they are becoming a minority. I was recently in Kosovo and I saw how difficult the situation is there for the remaining Christian population. Speaking about Turkey, we should be aware of the fact that apart from a rather tiny Greek minority there is also quite a large number of people from Russia and from other republics of the Soviet Union who belong to the Orthodox

Church. All of them who are practicing believers are the new flock of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Therefore I think that measures should be taken to extend pastoral care to these people. And I know that they are already priests in the Ecumenical Patriarchate who speak Russian and who work pastorally with these people. So, I think the situation, though difficult, is not without hope. And the flock of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Turkey is constantly growing. And this is a good sign and of course we are ready to assist the Ecumenical Patriarchate in every way in creating conditions for the pastoral care of all this Orthodox population regardless of their ethnic origin.

· Your Eminence, what do you think about the fact that there is still a problem to the succession of the Ecumenical Patriarch? What is the position of the Moscow Patriarchate about this? We still do not know what will be done ‘the day after’ for the succession of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew.

I think that this is a problem which has to be discussed between the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Turkish authorities. I understand that in recent years a sort of number of hierarchs living outside of Turkey have been given Turkish passports. And I think this will allow them to participate fully in the work of the Holy Synod. Of course with regards to the succession it is a very delicate issue and I don't think we can discuss it publicly but I can assure you that if the Russian Orthodox Church is asked to help in one way or another it will do so.

· We are watching you travelling a lot all around the world and we see that Russian Churches are being built in other continents too. Is it essential for your flock worldwide?

There have been many waves of immigration from Russia and from other countries of the former Soviet Union and now millions of Russian-speaking people are living all over the world. We do not build churches on our own initiative. But usually groups of Russian Orthodox believers write to the Patriarch or they write to me asking that a parish should be established. And then we begin to work for the establishment of this parish. Usually it starts as a very modest group of people who rent a building from the Catholics or from the civil authorities. But then if the flock is growing and if the parish become larger they are able to build the church for themselves. And there have been many Russian Orthodox churches which have been built recently in Europe and in other parts of the world, including for example Rome where a Russian Orthodox Church is now standing on the hill opposite Saint Peter's Cathedral. We can also for example include Cuba where there is now a beautiful Russian Church in Havana and many other places.

· Your Eminence I would like to thank you for giving me this interview. What would you like to say to the Greek people who will watch your interview on TV and read it in internet?

I would like to say that Greeks should keep, protect and cherish the Orthodox faith. If the Greeks go in the same direction like some other European countries by expelling Christianity from the public sphere and by being afraid to express their Orthodox faith because of so called tolerance or political correctness they will lose their country. Because it will no longer be Greece. Greece is unimaginable without Christianity. And I think every Greek person, whether is a strong believer or less strong believer, should do everything to protect Orthodox Christianity and to make sure that it is transmitted from the present generation to the future generation.

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