



‘We do not seek the defeat but the return of our brothers...’ – Interview by V. Legoida, head of the Synodal Information Department

The Appeal of the Russian Orthodox Church Holy Synod ‘To Orthodox Christians in Ukraine who stay outside the unity with the Holy Church’ has provoked a lively public discussion in Ukraine. The Synod of the so-called Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kievan Patriarchate (UOC KP) issued immediately a counter statement whose tone and affirmations may perplex the reader. At the request of the Bogoslov.ru website, this document is commented by V. Legoida, head of the Moscow Patriarchate’s Synodal Information Department.

- Vladimir Romanovich, the most recent statement of the non-recognized ‘Patriarchate of Kiev’, begins with an affirmation that this religious organization does not at all constitute a schism but as ‘a local Ukrainian Orthodox Church it represents an integral part of the One Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church in spite of the fact that the ROC and some like-minded Churches have not recognized it as such as yet’. Can you comment on this text?

- Let us begin with the fact that ‘some like-minded Churches’ are neither more nor less than all the autocephalous Orthodox Churches – the entire world Orthodox family! In seeking to justify the schism its leaders defy the elementary common sense; for can a church be part of the Catholic and Apostolic Church if the Church itself does not recognize this ‘part’ and has no communion whatsoever with it?

We know that Kiev has been a center of pan-Orthodox celebrations on many occasions, and the hierarchs of all or most of the Local Orthodox Churches assembled in the Ukrainian capital for various celebrations time and again. But they were guests of the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church and its lawful Primate, His Beatitude Metropolitan Vladimir of Kiev and All Ukraine, not those of the self-proclaimed ‘Patriarchate of Kiev’. A delegation of the ‘Orthodox Church of Montenegro’ led by ‘Metropolitan Michael’ was reported to have prayed with the leaders of this organization on July 28. But such reports can mislead only those who do not know that this ‘Church’ is a similar schismatic organization which does not enjoy any support from the devout people of Montenegro whose spiritual pastor is Metropolitan Amfilohije of Montenegro and Primorje, who is known to the entire Orthodox world. The one who came to Kiev as ‘Metropolitan of Montenegro’ was a former cleric of the Patriarchate of Constantinople who had been defrocked and anathemized long ago.

Those who have put themselves in this disastrous isolation from the Universal Church of Christ should

think about a return and the salvation of their souls rather than about some obscure 'divisions according to the principle of jurisdiction'.

- But it is affirmed in the same statement that those who separated themselves 'do not differ in any way from the fullness of the Orthodox Church either in doctrine or in celebration of the sacraments or in other divine services or in the implementation of the norms of canon law...

- How come they do not differ? One of the basic canonical norms in the Orthodox Church is a canon whereby no sustained or the more so defrocked priest can celebrate either the Divine Liturgy or any other religious rite. And here a man not only defrocked but altogether anathemized celebrates 'liturgies' and 'ordinations'. Isn't it a violation of all the norms of canon law? Does the doctrine of the Orthodox Church really state that any man who puts on the 'right' vestments and utters correct words can celebrate Sacraments?

The authors of this statement, in an attempt to prove that they are not schismatics, refer to the words of St. Basil the Great that a schism is 'a division in opinions on some church subjects', while 'the Patriarchate of Kiev' is alleged to have no division in opinions with the Church. I believe it is sufficient to pay attention to the question of who can celebrate and who cannot. As we can see, this question has been answered by our separated brothers in downright defiance of the canons established in the Orthodox Church.

In order to become a schismatic it is not all necessary to invent a special rite of one's own and to introduce a new doctrine (in the latter case it would be a heresy). According to John Zonara's definition, schismatics are those who are in the right mind with regard to the faith and dogmata, but who for some reasons have separated themselves to arrange separate assemblies of their own. This authoritative Byzantine canonist does not believe it necessary to specify these reasons, and it is not accidental. A schism is essentially formed by the very fact of ruptured communion with the Universal Church through an arbitrary separation from one's lawful supreme ecclesiastical authority. It is certainly condemned by the canons: 'If any presbyter or bishop or metropolitan dares to secede from communion with his own patriarch and does not mention his name... in the divine mystagogy, but before a synodical arraignment and his [the patriarch's] full condemnation, he creates a schism, the Holy Synod has decreed that this person be alienated from every priestly function (Double Council Canon 15). Summing up the above, the notion of schism can be formulated as follows: a schism is developed when certain hierarchs and clerics depart from the lawful supreme ecclesiastical authority and violate sacred canons and for this, on the basis of these canons and in accordance with a due procedure, they are excommunicated by the lawful church authority from communion with the Church. The rest of Orthodox Churches, too, recognize this excommunication and sustain communion with the schismatics. This is exactly what happened to the so-called 'Patriarchate of Kiev'.

- And what can be said about the arguments from the history of granting autocephaly in the 19th and 20th centuries? Indeed, sometimes there were canonical bans at that time as well, and the autocephalous status of new Local Churches was not recognized immediately... Sometimes the schism is cited between the Bulgarian Church and the Throne of Constantinople which lasted till 1945. And it all ended in the recognition of autocephaly. As proponents of 'the Patriarchate of Kiev' maintain, anathemas were simply forgotten with time.

- Indeed, the granting of autocephaly in the 19th-20th centuries was often associated with mutual misunderstanding of the sides, temporary interruption of communion and even church bans. However, these cases are radically different from the situation of 'the Patriarchate of Kiev', and not only because autocephaly was an agreed desire of all the faithful and their archpastors and pastors in the respective countries – something not detectable in the attitude of the Orthodox faithful in Ukraine.

In case of the so-called Bulgarian schism, this internal problem of the Church of Constantinople was brought up on its initiative for a pan-Orthodox discussion in 1872. As a result, the condemnation of the schism was not approved by the Patriarch of Jerusalem, the Synod of the Antiochian Church, the Synod of the Russian Church and the Churches of Romania and Serbia which were absent from the 1872 Council. As we can see, there was no consensus between all the Orthodox Churches. Therefore, throughout the period of the Bulgarian schism, partial communion between those departed and the Church remained, and there is a great deal of evidence to it. Whereas legitimate bans with regard to the initiators of the schism in Ukrainian Orthodoxy are recognized by the whole Orthodox world. They have had no communion with any of the Orthodox Churches.

Besides, the history of the Bulgarian division ended not in a simple and, so to say, automatic 'oblivion' of the anathemas and bans, but in a petition sent to the Patriarch of Constantinople by Metropolitan Stephan of Sophia asking him on behalf of his Synod to lift up church bans 'from the Bulgarian clergy and people'. From this it follows that the Bulgarian hierarchy recognized the bans as valid. Alas, no petitions of this kind have come to the canonical Church as yet. Incidentally, the Bulgarian schismatic leaders did not live to see the lawful autocephaly.

- Sometimes the Russian Orthodox Church is cited as one whose autocephaly was not recognized by Constantinople for over a hundred years...

- The refusal to recognize an autocephaly and a rupture of church communion are different things. It has been long proved on the basis of historical facts that from 1448 to 1589 the Russian Church retained full Eucharistic communion with the Church of Constantinople and Eastern Churches. In spite of the fact that the Patriarchate of Constantinople did not approve the autocephaly of the Russian Church

immediately, it continued communion with her in prayer and sacraments. No church bans were imposed on the Russian Church's bishops, clergy or laity at that time.

- To look at more recent examples, the Patriarchate of Kiev leaders have often compared themselves with the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia, as 'the schism' and later the overcoming of the tragic division were talked about for years.

- A more lame comparison is difficult to find. The Russian Church Outside Russia was brought about by well-known grave historical circumstances, a civil war and mass emigration. It was formed as a temporary structure, as its statute underscores. Its bishops, pastors and lay people have always considered themselves to be part of one Russian Church, self-governed until the godless power is abolished in the native land. None of the ROCOR hierarchs was defrocked or anathemized. The Russian Church Outside Russia was never completely isolated from Universal Orthodoxy. Therefore, the restoration of unity was a matter of time, though became possible only after the situation was radically changed in Russia, Ukraine and other countries under the jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church.

- Could you comment on the affirmation that the supreme ecclesiastical authority of the Russian Orthodox Church is not capable of 'being an authoritative and impartial interpreter of canons and statutes of the Church'?

- Apparently, you mean the so-called 'recognition of the sacraments' sought by the schismatics and the First Canon of St. Basil the Great cited by the Russian Orthodox Church Holy Synod in its appeal to the schismatics. But first of all, the Canon of Basil the Great speaks of the rite of accepting back in the Church for those who have fallen away from it, not about the 'recognition' of sacraments administered by those who continue to stay away from the Church. According to the schismatic leaders' statements, they are confident of their righteousness and need no repentance. Nevertheless, they seem to be distressed by the fact of non-recognition of their sacraments! A strange attitude, isn't it?

As for how appropriate it was for the ROC Holy Synod to refer to this canon, I can give this explanation: with reference to 'the old' St. Basil cites various practices of accepting schismatics through re-baptism (with reference to Cyprian and Firmilian) and without re-baptism (with reference to some of the Asians). For St. Basil it was decisive that those fallen away did not bear the grace of the Holy Spirit after their separation from the Church. The giving of grace ceased because the legitimate succession was interrupted. Those who were the first to fall away were consecrated by the fathers and had a spiritual gift through the laying of their hands. But those who alienated themselves became laymen who had no power either to administer baptism or ordination and could not give others the grace of the Holy Spirit from which they themselves fell away. Therefore, the practice of re-baptizing schismatics, in Basil's

view, was quite justified, and he did not deplore it in any way. But at the same time, he approved of another practice existing at that time, namely, acceptance of schismatics through repentance for the sake of edification of others. That is to say, for the sake of help to numerous repentants to come back to the Church.

The Holy Synod underscored St. Basil's principal idea that grace becomes scarce in a community which stays outside the Church. This grace can be replenished only in the Church, outside which it is meaningless to discuss norms of canon law. In other words, the recognition of the sacraments' administered by schismatics can be granted only if they come back to the Church with repentance. This is what St. Basil says. He does not at all discuss 'the recognition of sacraments' administered by schismatics who do not make repentance and who do not restore unity with the Church.

- As is known, the efforts of the present Ukrainian government are directed towards good-neighbourly relations with Russia. As the political situation in Ukraine has changed, is it appropriate to say that the Ukrainian Orthodox Church will use it to suppress the schism with the help of the government?

- There are no grounds for such statements. None of the officials authorized to speak for the Church have ever asked the government to use repressive measures against the schism. On the contrary, the appeal of the Russian Orthodox Church Synod and statements His Holiness Patriarch Kirill made in Ukraine are imbued with the spirit of love and compassion to those fallen away. As for the government, its function is to maintain law and remove legal violations in case there are such.

- The 'Synod of the Kievan Patriarchate' has addressed special warnings to all those who try to come back to the canonical Church. They are threatened with God's judgment. The canonical consecration of those who had been ordained by the Patriarchate of Kiev earlier is described in the statement as 'renunciation of Christ Himself' and 'blasphemy against the Holy Spirit'. References are made to canons.

- These statements show that schismatics are very far from a desire for dialogue in spite of the fact that they have declared this desire on many occasions. In fact, they have openly adopted an attitude of opposition to repentance and return to the Church. What dialogue do they speak about?

A reference to Apostolic Canon 68 is utterly irrelevant here. It states that a second ordination is inadmissible except for cases where the first one was administered by heretics. It means that a heretical 'ordination' is not recognized.

But does it mean that an ordination is invalid only if it was administered by those who sinned against the

doctrines of the faith? Nothing of the kind. If, say, two or three Christian laymen, who confess the Creed without any changes, come together and make up their minds to 'ordain', say, a bishop, would such an ordination be recognized as valid? For one to have the power to celebrate one has to be empowered by the Church.

Speaking about heretics, the authors of canons often do not make any clear distinction between heretics and schismatics. According to Canon 6 of the Second Ecumenical Council, those are called heretics whom the Church declared as such from old times and those who were anathemized after that, as well as those who, pretending to confess the sound faith, separate themselves and gather congregations in opposition to canonical bishops. That is, the fathers of the Council believed it impossible to confess the sound faith outside the Church; it is only possible to pretend. Therefore, in the canon they rank those who have separated themselves from the Church among heretics and even use the same designation for them.

On the other hand, St. John Chrysostom says that creating divisions in the Church is evil no lesser than heresy. The saving confession of faith is possible only in the Church and becomes meaningful only in the Church.

Coming back to Apostolic Canon 68, I have to admit that it speaks about the prohibition of a second valid ordination. But ordinations administered in the 'Patriarchate of Kiev' can by no means be called valid: they were administered by those who are deprived of the right to ordain.

It is interesting that 'the Kievan Patriarchate' leaders themselves have administered re-ordinations to the 'bishops' accepted from another schism, the so-called 'Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church'. The point was not that the latter confessed a distorted doctrine. The point is simply that its founders received 'consecrations' from a man who was not only deprived of the right to celebrate but has never been a bishop at all, namely, Deacon Vikenty Chekalin. Even the leaders of the schism took it as 'extremely' anti-canonical. Interestingly, one of these 'bishops' was re-consecrated in secret not immediately but only half a year after he moved to the ranks of proponents of 'the Patriarchate of Kiev'.

So, 'blasphemy against the Holy Spirit' is not at all a desire to settle one's canonical status, whose defectiveness is clear to many of the spiritual pastors of the schism, but an attempt to prevent them from doing it by threatening them with the Last Judgment. How can a return to the Church be a 'renunciation of Christ Himself'? Indeed, communion with Christ is possible only in the Church.

Actually, it is the renunciation of Christ and His Church that constitutes a schism. God grant that those who have departed from church communion come to realize it. We will be sincerely happy to see them returning and are always ready to accept them in love and humbleness. For, as Gregory the Theologian

said, so aptly cited by the Holy Synod, *we seek not the defeat but the return of our brothers because our separation grieves us.*

Source: <https://mospat.ru/en/news/56848/>