Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk: Many signals are coming from the schism that people feel the need to re-unite with the Church

On July 26, 2010, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, head of the Moscow Patriarchate's department for external church relations, answered questions from a correspondent of the Inter TV channel in Ukraine.

- Your Eminence, Kiev along with Moscow and St. Petersburg is a Synodal capital of the Russian Church. The Holy Synod met in the Kiev Laura of the Caves. What decisions were made?

- Kiev is the mother of Russian cities, and whenever we come here we experience special feelings and special trepidation, because we come in touch with the cradle which has given rise to our entire Russian Orthodox Christianity. Today when a thanksgiving was said at St. Sophia's, we came to feel especially acutely a link with those times when our ancestors built the Orthodox Church here, on Kievan hills. It is very important of course that the Holy Synod meet for the second time now in Kiev. Here we make decisions on a number of current issues, on one hand, but also decisions concerning directly the life of Ukraine, on the other. In particular, one of the themes for discussion at today's Holy Synod meeting will be the schism in Ukrainian Orthodoxy.

- What steps have to be made by the authorities and the public to overcome the schism?

- First, we have adopted an appeal to those who are outside the church unity. The point is that from within the schism, from lay people and those who are considered to be bishops there, we receive many signals that they feel the need to re-unite with the Church. People are oppressed by the situation in which they are deprived of an opportunity to participate in the life of Universal Orthodoxy, when they are cut off the vital stem and sources which nourish the Orthodox Church. This awareness of non-canonicity is very keen in the schism. There are groups of lay people, there are parishes and clergy who are

reuniting with the Church. This process has not become a mass one as yet, but it is underway in many dioceses in Ukraine.

There are also people who are still in schism but have already realized its fatality and now wish to re-unite with the Church. It is to these people as well as those who found themselves in the schism accidently or thoughtlessly or for other reasons that we wish to appeal by word and to call them back to the fold of the Mother Church.

Indeed, it should be admitted that the schism is a political project that emerged in the wake of the disintegration and nationalism soon after the collapse of the great state. The then Ukrainian authorities were interested in giving greater legitimacy to the newly-formed Ukrainian state through forming an independent Church of their own, on the one hand. On the other, former Metropolitan Philaret of Kiev was concerned for preserving his own power. This mutual concern, unfortunately, gave birth to a schism which grew by leaps and bounds thanks exclusively to the state support.

The very slogan that an independent state should have an independent Church is absolutely non-canonical. Moreover, it is not correspondent with the tradition of Orthodoxy. Suffice it to say that almost all the historically developed Patriarchates are multinational and their jurisdiction extends to several countries, namely, the Patriarchate of Jerusalem exercises jurisdiction over three countries, that of Alexandria and All Africa over 50 countries, etc. If the logic of the schismatics is to be observed, we should have divided all these great Churches into a great deal of small and weak churches. What for? There may be only one explanation of the reason: to weaken the Orthodox Church as much as possible.

The spiritual space we call Holy Rus has shaped through centuries, while state borders have repeatedly changed but the Church has preserved her unity. It is inadmissible to ruin what has shaped for centuries to please the political conjuncture. Therefore we should cherish this unity today.

Recalling the recent times when anti-Russian sentiments were instilled into people in Ukraine, when a negative image of Ukraine was created in Russia and in the mass media, one wonders what it all was done for and who needed it.

I had to live in Western Europe for many years. Take for instance France and Germany. They are neighbours. They have different languages, history and culture but there is no border between them. They have a common currency and a common cultural space. Russia and Ukraine have one faith, one Church. Certainly, we have different languages, but we still understand each other. When I come to Ukraine I have no problems with understanding Ukrainian. It means we have much in common. Why then should a wedge be driven in artificially? I believe the Church which has preserved her unique consolidating potential is the primary force capable of uniting people and help them to remember the

spiritual unity binding together the peoples of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, in spite of the state borders which have already shaped and which we respect and by no means challenge.

- The Holy Synod's Appeal points out that the circumstances have changed for the better. Does it mean that there are now chances to create a one Church?

- Every schism in history thrived when it was supported by the civil authorities. As soon as they stopped supporting a schism it began to deflate like a balloon. There are very many examples of it. So, the schism in Ukraine was inflated artificially, and now the prerequisites for blowing it further have gone, just as the fashion for schism which was there in the 90s together with the ideas of separatism and disintegration. Now people have come to realize that their children and grandchildren are to live in the same country and it is not necessary to continue living in a situation of enmity and accusations and it is better to live in a situation of peace and good will.

If we compare the propaganda waged by the schismatics with what the canonical Church says we will see a difference in the very spirit and tone. On the one hand, there is rancor and hatred and continually formulated ever new artificial accusations, while on the other, there is a spirit of peace and love which we have tried today to lay in our appeal to those who have fallen away from the one Church.

We have stated that the return to the Church is a natural process in which there is nothing humiliating, nor depriving people of what they used to possess. Today some of those who are in the schism and who are described in it as clergy and bishops ask: what will happen to us if we move to the canonical Church? Will we preserve our sacred awards and ranks? We have stated in our Appeal that the Church will herself decide on the right way of accepting whose who have fallen away from her, but she has the power and authority to inform even that which was done in the schism with a grace-giving contents. It applies, say, to the Sacrament of Baptism. We cannot recognize the baptism administered by the schismatics but if people are returning from the schism then the canonical Church is capable of giving a due contents and grace-giving power even to those sacraments which were administered outside her. This practice has existed for many centuries.

- Is it true that a metropolitan of the 'Patriarchate of Kiev, the late Andrey Gorak, was going before his death to make repentance and return to the fold of the canonical Orthodox Church?

- I can speak about it with all the responsibility because I knew him personally and talked with him on several occasions. We met twice and talked over telephone many times. He had a quite firm and long-standing desire to re-unite with the Church. When we met he said literally the following: 'I curse myself every day for going into the schism'. He saw his weakness in it and realized that there was no grace-giving life in a schism. After we talked for an hour he said: 'Thank you for having met with me. I felt myself in an atmosphere of the Church… There is no such atmosphere with us'. I was struck very much by his negative attitude to the leaders of the organization to which he belonged. He realized that in that community there was no grace.

He was aware of his own weakness. He wanted to move to the canonical Church and prepared himself for this move by collecting the necessary documents. And a few days after that event he died suddenly. He was not a healthy man. He was ill, underwent an operation, but that death made a strange and grave impression because everybody knew that he and many priests together with him wanted to move to the canonical Church, and now suddenly he passed away…

- Let us sum up the visit of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill to the regions. For the first time in history, the Patriarch visited the dioceses of Dnepropetrovsk and Odessa. What are the results of this visit and what are His Holiness's personal impressions?

- His Holiness the Patriarch came to Ukraine not as a foreign guest but as the Patriarch of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. He came to see his flock who awaited him. We saw this everywhere last year and during the present visit. We saw dozens of thousands who assembled to pray together with their Patriarch. We saw their enthusiasm, love and desire to preserve the unity of the Church.

Within the canonical Church there are no schismatic sentiments – this is what should be understood. Again and again we see it in our talks with bishops, in Patriarch's talks with his flock. It is a one Church, and we will preserve this unity and fortify it by all means. His Holiness the Patriarch, who holds equally dear his flock in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and other countries as parts of the canonical space of the Russian Orthodox Church, will continue coming to these countries to see his flock. I would like to see these visits as no longer extraordinary events, to see them as significant as they are today but more frequent. People should get accustomed to see their Patriarch not only on TV but also to communicate with him live. I believe it is the primary task that the Patriarch has set himself visiting dioceses in Ukraine and other countries.

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