Metropolitan Hilarion: There is nothing humiliating in coming back from a schism

The Chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's department for external church relations, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, has given an interview to the DECR official website concerning the establishment of a Commission on Schisms:

- A Commission on Schism has been set up within the Inter-Council Presence, of which you are chairman. What are the tasks of the Commission? Are there any results of its work?

- First of all, the Commission has addressed the historical precedents of schisms and ways of overcoming them. It is a foundation on which the development and systematization of criteria for making judgments on schisms are to be built. Finally, these criteria are used to prepare proposals on overcoming schisms and a procedure for coming back to the Church for those who have fallen away from it.

The first meeting of the Commission took place on March 25 at the Dormition Laura of the Caves in Kiev. It was chaired by His Beatitude Metropolitan Vladimir of Kiev and All Ukraine. The working groups are holding their meetings. We have formulated the priority themes for us to study and elaborate. The Commission members have actively communicated through e-mail and worked on draft documents.

- When you speak of general criteria of making judgments on schism, what do you mean?

- Church divisions are not the same everywhere and not any of them is a schism. For instance, history has repeatedly seen it happened so that parts of a particular Local Church interrupted communion with each other for a long time for historical or political reasons. Take for example, the Ignatians and the Photians in the Church of Constantinople in the 9th century. The confrontation between them was supported and exacerbated to no small extent by changes in the policy and coups-d'état. In the early 10th century, Patriarch Nicholas refused to recognize Emperor Leo VI's fourth marriage and was

deposed and replaced by Patriarch Euphemius for it to produce a church division for some time. In the 13th century, supporters of Patriarch Arsenius formed another division in the Church by refusing to recognize the deposition of the Lascaris Family and the rise of a new dynasty of the Paleologues.

There were also church divisions in the hard situation of persecution against the Church in the Soviet Russia. In post-Revolution years, some bishops together with their supporters among the clergy and laity ruptured communion with Patriarchal Locum Tenens deputy, Metropolitan Sergiy.

In such cases, the guilty and the innocent ought not to be sought, because these divisions normally become things of the past together with the historical reasons that generated them. The Church has canonized both Patriarch Ignatius and Patriarch Photius, and the Russian Church has canonized as new martyrs and confessors the bishops and priests who belonged to different 'parties'. It happened so, for instance, in relations between the Russian Orthodox Church in Russia and those of her faithful who had to leave Russia after the political upheavals of the early 20th century. In the final analysis, the same confession of faith, our common roots and intact apostolic Tradition and the common prayer of the faithful for unification have led to the restoration of unity.

A schism, on the contrary, is first of all a product of the hardening of the heart, when a person places his interests and personal convictions above the unshakable foundations on which the Church's being stands as a depository of grace. In this case, a typical manifestation is a neglect of the principle of apostolic continuity, which since the Pentecost has underlain the unity of the Church as one of the historical guarantees of the authentic church Tradition.

- What is your assessment of prospects for overcoming the schism in Ukraine?

- The present situation is favourable to overcoming the schism. Widely spread schisms in Ukraine have been in many ways conditioned by the political state of affairs, which is becoming a thing of the past right before our eyes. The popularity of a schism lies in its political engagement, which is also a guarantee of its short life. It is not surprising that many believers in Ukraine, having found themselves in tight limits of a schismatic community, seek to return to the full communion with the Church.

Every human soul is precious in itself, be it in the full communion with the Church or in a drift *in a distant country*. And the Church as a loving mother is always glad to accept back her lost children with invariable love and gentleness. Therefore I said earlier and will repeat it now that there must be nothing humiliating in the procedure of coming back from a schism. There is no humiliation in repentance as repentance is a person's recovery of his authentic eternal dignity and essence. This should be

remembered both by those who are coming back to the church fold and those who accept them back. The latter need to be especially sensible and without rancor so that on the human level the process of people's return from a schism and their integration in the life of our Church may not humiliate their feelings.

- As DECR Chairman what can you say about the problem of opposing schism on the pan-Orthodox scale?

- Certainly, it is very important that bishops of all the local Churches, in their desire to help heal schisms in full measure, should show solidarity, being aware of our common belonging to one Church. Schismatics should not receive a false impression that they can be granted the Eucharistic communion and church recognition *by any other way* (Jn. 10:1), that is, without repentance of the sin of schism, without asking the Mother Church, from which they separated themselves, for a resolving prayer. The fact that the church schisms I mentioned earlier do not enjoy the Eucharistic communion with any of the Local Orthodox Church in the world is a direct testimony to our unanimity in the Holy Spirit: it is the voice of the Church's conciliar mind.

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