



Patriarch Kirill: Love is the basis of our church life

Here is published the full version of His Holiness' interview to the Greek newspaper "BHMA".

A year and a half ago you became Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia. What have been the most moving moments in your ministry since that you can remember?

There have been many such moments but of primary importance for me is an opportunity for praying together with a great number of Orthodox people in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan and in all the countries I have been to with a pastoral or official visit. For me it is a great joy to see the faith of people and their profound commitment to the Lord and His Holy Church.

In spite of all the disasters of the 20th century, the faith of Old Russia's saints lives in their spiritual heirs – and I have had an occasion to see it again and again. The priceless spiritual experience of Russia's new martyrs and confessors has become the basis of today's experience of religious life in Russia. When you see the spiritual life regenerated where nothing seems to have been left except for abandoned ruins, when you see people educated for the militant rejection of Orthodoxy returning to the Lord in repentance and faith, you become aware especially clearly of the immutability of our Saviour's words, 'I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it' (Mt. 16:18).

What difficulties are encountered by the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church? How heavy is the mission placed on you?

Today our Church carries out its service in a situation generated by the long decades of official atheism, when people were artificially isolated from their own spiritual and, to a considerable extent, cultural tradition.

We face an enormous task to return to people their own heritage – the Orthodox culture and worldview, and we should fulfill this task under condition never encountered by the Church for all the centuries of its existence.

Some problems are common for all Europe. These are economic inequality, injustice and difficulties in

inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations. We also have to deal with the spreading cult of pleasure and rampant consumption which often push people towards dishonest and criminal way of life.

Common for us all is also the problem of propaganda of militant secularism which seeks to force any presence of the Church out of public life and expressly rejects the Christian roots of our civilization. We have also encountered the spread – sometimes turning into imposition – of immoral and pernicious things rising against the very nature of family and marriage. However, we do not doubt that through the prayers of all the faithful and all the saints standing in heaven before the throne of God the Church will continue to fulfill its calling to preach the world of God and to lead people to salvation.

In recent years we have seen Russian political leaders turning to the Church. Recently we have seen President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin praying in church. The president's wife visits churches as well, and, as we have recently seen, while in Greece she visited famous monasteries and holy places associated with the ministry of the Apostle of Nations, St. Paul. How people raised up in atheism can turn out to be believers?

Christ never ceases to save. He always calls, 'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest' (Mt. 11:28). It is also true for both those who could hear the preaching of the gospel since childhood and those who was brought up in the situation of forced atheism. It is true for both the most ordinary people and those who occupy the highest posts.

I believe the highest statesmen's turning to Orthodoxy is not a political step, nor an attempt to keep up with fashion but a sincere search for God's help and guidance. It is very important that Christian, Orthodox motivation and concern for people, for preservation and assertion of those moral values without which human society cannot exist should be present in the actions of statesmen.

The Russian Orthodox Church does not seek an official status. The Church is separated from the state and we are not going to change it. The Church, however, being separated from the state, is not separated from the people. The Church cannot decline responsibility for the spiritual condition of the nation including its leading strata.

Isn't there certain demonstrativeness? In Greece, people, seeing praying politicians, are inclined to believe that in their actions there may be a wish to draw in votes in this way.

We cannot and must not look for some hidden motives behind people's coming to church, be they politicians, workers, professors or housewives. The Church welcomes all with love. The service of a politician requires special responsibility and wisdom, and if people seek it in prayer to God and in the church teaching, well, this is where it should be sought. As it is said in Scriptures, 'One rules over men in righteousness when he rules in the fear of God' (2 Sam. 23:3).

One of the biblical politicians, namely, King Solomon, managed to ensure the prosperity of his kingdom precisely because he sought God's guidance. The Bible conveys his prayer to us: 'So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?' (1 Kings 3:9).

Church and state are different institutions with different tasks and different methods. The task of the Church is people's eternal salvation, while the task of the state is a good organization of their earthly life. But any responsible statesman realizes that good organization is impossible without reliance on spiritual values, on the Christian foundation on which our civilization was built from the very beginning.

Recently you met with Patriarch Theodore of Alexandria and soon you will host the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. Then you plan to pay a visit to Patriarch Ignatios of Antioch in Syria. How solid in your view is the unity of Orthodox Churches?

The unity of the Church is its intrinsic mysterious property granted by God; wherever canonical Orthodox communities may be, they belong to one and the same Church whose head is Christ. However, to keep the unity of Local Churches is a task also requiring our human efforts. Since Churches' primates are responsible for the unity of the catholic Church, there is an old tradition to communicate with one another through correspondence and also visits. Our era has considerably increased opportunities for communication, and now we can meet with other primates more often. These meetings in themselves are a vivid testimony to our unity.

The manifestation of church unity cannot be reduced to official primatial visits, of course. Contacts between Local Churches are maintained in very diverse fields between theologians and scholars, students and pilgrims.

A special place is given to preparations for a Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church. The joint discussion on common Orthodox problems involves hierarchs and theologians from various autocephalous Churches. The resumption of these meetings in recent times is a good sign of the consolidated unity of the Church.

Many believe that the forthcoming Pan-Orthodox Council will not be able to resolve major problems concerning intra-Orthodox unity. What is your opinion on this matter?

A Church Council is a miracle and mystery. When hierarchs gather together in the Holy Spirit to solve problems important for the Church, enmity and differences are gone to leave 'the program of the Holy Spirit', as my ever memorable predecessor, Patriarch Sergius of Moscow, used to say. I myself have witnessed on many occasions the seeming deadlocks suddenly, through the work of the Holy Spirit, unlocked to result in a common decision to everyone's delight.

One should not expect from a Council, which has not been held for several centuries, to resolve all the existing problems overnight: we remember that Ecumenical Councils, such as the First and Fourth ones, making a decision on the right faith, could not immediately overcome all the church disorders involved in Arianism and Monophysitism. But it is necessary to ensure that in today's situation a Council should work again as an assembly of the entire Orthodox Church, as a place where, with God's help, decisions are taken in conformity with the Orthodox Tradition and the present condition of the Church.

It should not be forgotten that no Council can enjoy authority unless its decisions are received by the fullness of the Church. Here we are reminded of the sad experience of the Council of Ferrara-Florence which was rejected by the East to lose any authority in the Orthodox Church.

The success of the forthcoming Pan-Orthodox Council depends on both the will of God and the thoughts with which Local Churches will send their representatives to it. Let us pray so that the Lord may bless the work to prepare the Council and let us work to achieve unanimity in the spirit of Christ's love.

Can Constantinople and Moscow go forward together?

If the Churches of Constantinople and Russia have already walked together for a thousand years, then what can become an obstacle for our further common witness? I am confident that all the Local Churches not only can but also must work together, supporting one another in common witness. They must do it because unity has been commanded by Christ himself, because unity is not only a proof of our conformity to the gospel's commandments but also reconfirmation of the vitality and rightness of the Orthodox ecclesiological model. And if there are any differences in opinion between Local Churches, then they are called to find those who are approved by God (cf. 1 Cor. 11:19). It is love, not rivalry that is

the basis of our church life because we are one Body of Christ and each of us is part of it (cf. 1 Cor. 12:27). For me the very idea that Orthodox Churches are unable to sacrifice their so-called 'interests' for the God-commanded unity is unacceptable.

I closely follow some journalists describing our relations with the Patriarchate of Constantinople. When you read these bleak commentaries and prognoses you get an impression that there is a confrontation or almost a war. But none of these pessimistic prognoses has come true. Moreover, at present relations between our two Patriarchates have reached a qualitatively new level, and the visit of His Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch to our Church is the best testimony to it. Certainly, this picture does not suit those who in pursuit of sensation wish to see secret intrigues and designs in everything. But the Church is not a mere human organization precisely because it is called to reveal the Kingdom of God and is called to save the world.

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