



‘The task of the Russian Orthodox Church’s dialogue with the Catholic Church in Poland is to rise above political conjuncture’. Interview of DECR vice-chairman Hegumen Philip Riabykh with Blagovest-infor news agency

- Father Philip, on April 7 Russia and Poland will mark the sorrowful date, the 70th anniversary of the Katyn tragedy. The Russian Orthodox Church will take part in this commemorative event. Please tells us what exactly will leaders of the two Slavic nations remember on this day?

- The Katyn tragedy or the Katyn shooting are the names given to the execution of Polish officers who were captured in the course of the Red Army’s entry into the territory of Western Ukraine and Byelorussia in 1939. It is rather a conditional name because Polish captives were shot to death in other places, too, such as Kalinin (now Tver), Kharkov and other places in the former Soviet Union. The Katyn forest near Smolensk became a common grave for about four and a half thousand Polish officers. It is not the largest burial place since at Mednoye near Tver over six thousand Poles were buried.

However, these executions are firmly associated with Katyn as this place was discovered first, already during World War II.

April the 7th, 1940, chosen as the commemoration day of the Katyn victims, is considered to be an estimated date of the executions near Smolensk, which continued till the middle of May.

- Can we say that Katyn is a common grave only for Polish officers?

- No, it is wrong. Mass burials began in Katyn a few years before 1940. In those ditches, hundreds of our compatriots, victims of Stalin’s repressions, were buried. According to recent estimates, nearly 6, 5 thousands of our own fellow-citizens were buried in the Katyn forest, even more than Poles. Among these Soviet citizens are both victims of the 1930s-1940s repressions and Red Army prisoners of war who were shot to death by the Nazis when they occupied these places.

There was a similar picture at Mednoye, which has been already mentioned. More Soviet people than Polish officers were buried there.

I would like to make a special mention of the fact that among Russians buried in Katyn is Archbishop Seraphim (Ostroumov) of Smolensk and Dorogobuzh, a new martyr who has been canonized by our Church. The remains of a whole number of other clergymen from the Smolensk diocese are believed to rest in that soil.

- How did the Russian Church react to reports that mass graves of victims of the repressions were discovered in Katyn?

- Since the opening up of the first graves in the 1990s in Katyn our Church has always prayed for those who were buried there. Services for the dead were held regularly and a reverence cross was installed. The ruling bishop of the Smolensk diocese, Metropolitan Kirill, now Patriarch has given his blessing upon inquiries into the fate of those who were executed, especially those who suffered for the faith in Christ. He called that place 'the Russian Golgotha'. In 2005, Metropolitan Kirill laid the foundation stone for a memorial church dedicated to the Holy Passion-bearers Boris and Gleb in the territory of the Katyn Memorial. On April 7, it is planned to bless the foundation of this church in which the victims of the executions will be constantly commemorated and a charity center will be established.

- Are people in Russia today aware of the significance of the Katyn tragedy? What is, in your view, Katyn's principal lesson for our people?

- It seems to me that while remembering Katyn, people in Russia do not put their accents quite correctly. As I have already said, we speak about an enormous common grave, and buried in it are mostly people of our two countries. The attitude of the Poles to this tragedy is quite understandable as they remember and speak primarily about their own compatriots. But we should also remember our own compatriots, the more so that they are the most numerous in Katyn. Unfortunately, the process of establishing the identities of those who were killed and perpetuating their memory is still slow.

There is an expression: 'Russians do not abandon their own'. I believe it is true for both our living compatriots and the dead. In his time, Alexander Solzhenitsyn said that the task of a state is to preserve the people. The memory of victims of the repressions is not only a tribute to the slain but also a

guarantee that the elimination of one's own people will be never repeated.

Yes, repression and intimidation may create conditions for mobilizing human resources for some time, but history has shown that these resources are quickly exhausted and the society goes to ruin. A model of development based on fear has proved nonviable. But why did such a model become possible in our country?

According to remarkable poet Joseph Brodsky, 'One who spits at God will first have spattered you and me'. In my view, the primary reason for the tragedy that happened in our country in the 20th century was renunciation of God. It is the reason that led to such a brutal treatment of one's own people.

Certainly, violence is inherent in any power. Any government would resort to coercion. Violence was also used before the 1917 Revolution when the government claimed to be Orthodox. It is there today as well. But what is always important is the question of the scale of violence, its proportion to the threats really faced by a society. And sacrifices made in the years of Stalin's repression are glaringly disproportionate to the real threats which arose before society. They were dictated by a desire to create an ideological uniformity and to build a paradise on earth. Personally I regret though that the idea of social justice was brought in the life of our Motherland coupled with militant atheism. Indeed, none other than holy fathers have so many texts calling to justice and sharing one's wealth with the poor.

The most important thing that Katyn can teach us today is to never forget that breaking with God unleashes diabolical forces in the people. Remembering this tragedy, our people must make sure that godlessness should never return, as it opens a way to an anti-human policy of the state, to enmity and hatred within society.

We should remember the victims of those massacre repressions just as we remember those who fell defending our Motherland in the Great Patriotic War battles. Just as we seek to identify the names of all the soldiers who were killed in action and to perpetuate their names on obelisks, we should know and remember the names of those who were executed by the godless regime, just as we should remember thousands of ordinary soldiers and officers who were killed in action during World War I and the Soviet-Polish war of the 1920s. This memory has nothing to do with politics because it is a living memory of today's Russians for their ancestors and members of their families. It is in this way that Poles commemorate their relatives buried in Katyn and Mednoe. They take out their pictures from family archives and hang them on the wall, thus showing their love for them.

- We have come back to the 'Polish' theme. Clearly, Katyn occupies a special place amid the sorrowful places where the terrible machine of repression worked since Katyn is associated first of all with the execution of people from the other state.

- Yes, in that place the tragedies of two nations, Russian and Polish, came in touch. And I am sure that today when perpetrators of that crime themselves sank into the grave long ago, the Russian and Polish people should together remember the victims of that tragedy and do all that is possible to prevent such regimes, cruel towards their own people and evil towards their neighbours, from re-emergence in Europe.

The history of our relationship with Poland has been very complicated. It is not exhausted by the 20th century tragedies. Suffice it to remember the forceful Polonization of the Ukrainians and Byelorussians who lived in the territory of the Polish state and the campaigns of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth against Moscow Russia in the 17th century. And in the 20th century, too, Orthodox churches were destroyed not only in the territory of the triumphant atheism but also in Christian Poland... Certainly, there are negative things that the Poles can recall about their Eastern neighbor in their turn. It is understandable since throughout history these two dynamic nations used to inflict on each other severe wounds and offences in their struggle for domination in Eastern Europe.

But however paradoxical it may be seen at the first glance, I can assert that the 20th century actually reconciled our two nations. It removed the load of historical offences. Our two nations made incredible sacrifices. After such a history any attempt to 'compete' about who suffered the most appears simply senseless. Is it possible for Russians and Poles, after the horrors of communist repressions and after World War II, enter into a race for the greatest number of the slain?

The enormous losses suffered by Russia and Poland in the 20th century give us reason for resetting our relations and 'zeroize' all our mutual grievances.

- If I have understood you correctly, you would like to say that a reflection on the Katyn tragedy can help reconcile the Polish and Russian nations?

- Yes, bowing our heads before the victims of Stalin's repressions in Katyn and in many other places, we can make an important step towards reconciliation. And this process should not be limited to our two nations. Poland is a dynamic country playing a very important role today in Eastern Europe. And if Russia finds a clue to improving relations with Poland we can hope for an improvement of climate in Eastern Europe as a whole.

Katyn can be said to be a kind of the Gordian knot in relations between Russia and Eastern European countries. And this knot can be cut by simple human compassion and common grateful memory of the victims. Today Russia is trying to cut this knot and doing it with dignity.

Some fear that the recognition of massacres of the Soviet past will somehow humiliate the dignity of today's Russia. But today's Russia is a different Russia who made her choice in 1991 and changed the path of her history. A historical repentance was made when our people abandoned official atheism and ideological monopoly.

Russia's dignity lies in the fact that, remembering the Katyn victims, she kneels not before external competitors or any political force but first of all before her own people who were killed in that massacre, just as we kneel before those who died in the struggle with Nazism. Making a due assessment of the objectively evil deeds of the past, we do not renounce Russia with all that was good in people's life in the Soviet time.

The efforts taken by Prime Minister Putin in this direction – indeed, it was he who invited Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk to come to Katyn – show that the Russian leadership is making a serious step towards reconciliation and creation of an atmosphere of trust in Eastern Europe based on the lofty ideals of humanity.

- Who will participate in the mourning events in Katyn planned for April 7? Who will represent Churches?

- The events will be held on a high governmental level. The Polish prime minister included in his delegation representatives of the Catholic Church in Poland. The Russian Orthodox Church will be represented by the ruling Bishop Feofilakt of Smolensk and Vyazma and a DECR vice-chairman.

- Tell us please about the role that the Russian Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church of Poland play in the dialogue of the two nations.

- The idea itself to contribute to reconciliation between our two nations arose within the Catholic Church in Poland and the Russian Orthodox Church. As a result of negotiations, a meeting between two church delegations took place on February 26, 2010, in Warsaw. It was agreed to set up a working group for developing a document on reconciliation between the two nations nourished spiritually by the Russian

Orthodox Church, on one hand, the Polish people, on the other. It was also agreed that on the Polish side this working group will include the Polish Orthodox Church and from the Russian side the Catholic Church in Russia. The exact membership of the group will be determined by the next round of negotiations to take place this spring, tentatively in May.

- What is the principal message that the Orthodox and the Catholic Churches bring to the peoples of Russia and Poland and, more broadly, to the nations of today's Europe?

- Our dialogue with the Catholic Church in Poland is significant in that we try to rise above the political conjuncture and find a language of values, common goals and tasks which will enable us to look at each other not as enemies and to find a common vision of spiritual challenges faced by our nations.

The Churches cannot solve political problems by themselves but they can create a spiritual atmosphere necessary for normalizing relations. Public leaders should join in this good task along with Churches.

There have been many things in common in the history of the Catholic Church in Poland and the Orthodox Church in Russia. The both of our communities suffered severe persecution under the godless regime. This persecution was not carried out by some external power but by the hands of our own compatriots for seventy years in Russia and forty years in Poland. And we remember not only new Russian martyrs who are thousands but also Polish Christians who martyred for their faith under totalitarianism, among them, Father Jerzy Popieluszko who was killed by secret service agents in 1984, when the Soviet power was already in decline.

And today when our two Churches are reviving after the godless persecution, we have one great common task to defend Christian values in Europe and the world. In our days, Christianity in the Old World is threaten by a new enemy, which is no longer Nazism or communism but aggressive secularism with its task to oust Christianity from public sphere and isolate it in a ghetto of private life.

We, Russians and Poles, are well aware of the consequences brought about by such attitude to religion. These are concentration camps and massacre. And we should together tell European citizens: Stop, you cannot do this to your own spiritual tradition which views man as the image and likeness of God, for it is only on this foundation that human rights and dignity can rest thus ensuring the prosperity of the European civilization.

Interviewer Dmitry Vlasov

Source: <https://mospat.ru/en/news/57442/>