The DECR Chairman: "We are not prepared to talk either of concrete time, or concrete venue of the meeting between the Patriarch of Moscow and the Pope of Rome"

On 12 January 2009, Archbishop Hilarion of Volokolamsk **met with the Russian and foreign journalists at the Department for external church relations that he chairs** and answered, inter alia, a question about the relations between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church.

The journalists were interested in prospects of a personal meeting of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia with the Pope of Rome Benedict XVI.

"We are not prepared as yet to talk either of concrete time, or concrete venue of the meeting between the Patriarch of Moscow and the Pope of Rome," Archbishop Hilarion said. "We say that this meeting should be thoroughly and well prepared, and preparation should include not only protocol formalities."

Archbishop Hilarion reminded the audience that a meeting of the Pope of Rome John Paul II with the Patriarch of Moscow Alexy II was in the process of preparation in 1997 with all protocol formalities elaborated. "However, the DECR chairman noted, this meeting had not taken place, as at the last moment it became clear that it would be impossible to reach a consensus on the problems for the solution of which, from our point of view, the meeting could have been of real significance. Therefore, we should work for consensus at the preparatory stage in order that the meeting could consolidate mutual understanding reached earlier at the level of official delegations As soon as it happens, obstacles to the meeting between the Pope of Rome and the Patriarch of Moscow will be removed."

Archbishop Hilarion explained that a prime obstacle to the meeting is the situation in Western Ukraine. Hundreds of church buildings were seized by the Greek-Catholics in 1990s, while the interests of the Orthodox Christians who have prayed in these churches since 1946 were not considered, and violent means were used.

"There are many people in Western Ukraine who consider themselves Orthodox. They were deprived of an opportunity to pray in churches and take part in the sacraments because the churches were given to the Greek-Catholics. Even if these churches had been originally Greek-Catholic, there were Orthodox for over fifty years, and many people were baptized, married and spiritually educated in them. These

churches were forcibly taken away from them, and they have received nothing in return. Comparable situation should have never emerged in a civilized society. We await concrete steps of the Catholic Church towards improvement in the situation," Archbishop Hilarion said.

As to the steps, he mentioned a possible assistance of the representatives of the Catholic Church in the solution of the problem. "There are places in Western Ukraine the situation in which is really flagrant. Orthodox Christians have no churches, neither worthy places to pray, and it is only an interference of the Greek-Catholics or the Vatican that could drastically improve the situation. Unfortunately, they have not interfered as yet, though we are in negotiations with the Vatican."

Archbishop Hilarion told the audience about his visit to the Vatican last September and his meeting with Cardinal Leonardo Sandri, prefect of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches, at which he proposed the cardinal to hold negotiations, with the Greek-Catholic involvement, to discuss concrete issues and problems current in Western Ukraine. "I was told that it was quite possible, but several months passed and there have been no notification from the Vatican or the Greek-Catholics. We still expect positive changes; when they take place, when we see positive dynamics in the solution of these problems, we shall be able, as I believe, to come back to a meeting between the Pope and the Patriarch. We are not interested in a ceremonial meeting and handshakes before TV cameras, as the late Patriarch Alexy II used to say."

There are other problems demanding consideration in the relations between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church, but they are not so acute and are peacefully discussed in our bilateral dialogue, the DECR chairman added.

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