



Chairman of the Department for External Church Relations: "It is impossible to solve religious issues by political means"

On 12 January 2010, Archbishop Hilarion met with the Russian and foreign journalists at the Moscow Patriarchate Department for External Church Relations. One of the questions regarded the interconnection between church and political problems in the post-Soviet domain.

While answering the question about the interconnection between church and political problems in the post-Soviet space, Archbishop Hilarion said in particular, "There is no doubt that such connection exists though it is not direct, and it is impossible to solve religious issues by political means, likewise it is impossible to solve political problems by church means, though relations among the Churches may contribute to the improvement of relations among countries, nations, and even between politicians." He cited as a positive example the recent exchange of church ambassadors between the Russian and the Georgian Orthodox Churches, and expressed his hope for the church ambassadors to "offer their mite to the reconciliation of the two countries on political level, too."

The archpastor touched upon the church situation in Estonia, where a structure of the Patriarchate of Constantinople had been unilaterally established in 1996. "That had led to the rupture of relations between the Patriarchates of Moscow and of Constantinople for four months, during which we had no Eucharistic communion which in the church diplomatic language means the complete severance of relations. Later, in the course of very difficult negotiations, both sides settled for a compromise; the Eucharistic communion was restored, though the relations remained tense. The Estonian problem has not been solved as yet, and in this sense we cannot consider the issue closed and the page turned over, but at least we can state the goodwill of both sides - the Patriarchate of Moscow and the Patriarchate of Constantinople, and also the wish to evade mistakes of the kind in future and to solve the emerging problems and differences in the spirit of peace and consent."

Elaborating upon the subject of the connection between political and church problems, Archbishop Hilarion gave a detailed account of the situation in Ukraine. He underscored that "some positive changes begin to show, such as the return of some schismatic parishes, including large ones, to the fold of the canonical Church.

"A dialogue between the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate and the so called "Ukrainian autocephalous orthodox church" began in 2009 along with the meetings to prepare the

dialogue between the canonical Ukrainian Church with the so called "patriarchate of Kiev." A dialogue is always better than a war; therefore we may say, without predetermining the outcome of this dialogue, that the beginning of such talks in itself has an undoubtedly positive meaning," the DECR chairman said.

Archbishop Hilarion paid much attention to the results of the visit of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill to Ukraine: "It was more than a pastoral visit, it was not just a Patriarch's dialogue with Orthodox believers. Practically all Ukraine participated in this visit by way of mass media. Thanks to the "Inter" TV channel, the Patriarch had a rather long and substantial dialogue with the Ukrainian TV audience. I think this visit served in a sense as a catalyst for positive changes that followed shortly after."

"A desire for consolidation on moral and religious levels is evident in Ukraine at present, and Patriarch Kirill's visit has clearly shown it," the DECR chairman said. "When we were preparing this visit, some intimidated us by saying there would be crowds with banners in the streets driven by the opposition, but we saw groups of people, small in number, under the flag of one political party in some places. The absolute majority of the people we met were Orthodox believers who welcomed His Holiness the Patriarch as their spiritual leader, as their father. They chanted: "Kirill is our Patriarch!" We saw this in Kiev, as well as in the Eastern and Western parts of Ukraine."

Archbishop Hilarion also expressed his confidence in that the next Ukrainian President, whoever it may be, should not interfere in the religious situation in Ukraine or support either side. "We are confident that the Local Ukrainian Church, the establishment of which President Yuschenko always mentions, already exists. It is the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. The task is not to set up a new Church on the basis of the canonical Church, two schismatic structures and the Greek-Catholic Church that is not a part of the Orthodox Church. The task is to strengthen the canonical Orthodoxy and to help people who have fallen away from it mainly for political reasons to return to the fold of the canonical Church. Politically loaded slogans, like "An independent Church for the independent Ukraine", are based neither on the canonical Tradition of the Church nor on certain theological premises, but solely on political fantasies of certain politicians. They have become the thing of the past and lost their popularity, and this is certainly a positive sign. People in Ukraine understand today that the Church is the Church, and politics are politics.

The wisest thing a new Ukrainian President could do is to stand aside from religious affairs and to give the Ukrainian Orthodox believers, guided by their Patriarch and His Beatitude the Metropolitan, an opportunity for dialogue with those who have broke away from the Church in order to overcome the schism that unfortunately existed for almost twenty years by church means."