



THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

Department for External Church Relations

Archbishop Hilarion's answers questions from Der Spiegel

Archbishop Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate department for external church relations, answered questions from Der Spiegel magazine. Below is the text of the talk His Eminence Hilarion had with the magazine's correspondents.

The interview is published in Der Spiegel's issue No. 51, 2009.

- How would you explain the difference between the Orthodox, the Catholic and the Protestant Churches?

- The Orthodox and the Catholic Churches have only some differences in theology and models of church order. Thus, we do not recognize the supreme authority of the Pope of Rome over other Churches. However, the differences between Orthodoxy and Catholicism are not fundamental. We recognize the Sacraments of the Catholic Church. If a Catholic priest moves over to Orthodoxy we accept him as priest. As for Protestant churches, we do not recognize them as Churches, seeing in them only communities of Christians. We have fundamental differences in theology and ethics.

- What are they exactly?

- Many Protestant churches have liberalized their notions of ethics, giving a theological justification to homosexuality and blessing same-sex couples. Some refuse to consider abortion to be a sin. We do not share the understanding of the Church and church order, especially as the Protestants, unlike the Orthodox and Catholic Churches, ordain women.

- Because the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany elected a woman as chairperson in the person of Margot Kaessmann, you have broken off your dialogue...

- It was the way in which some mass media presented the situation, whereas I only said that we cannot continue theological dialogue in the former forms.

- Which boils down to the same thing after all. You do not want to have talks with Ms Kaessmann?

- So far we have had meetings between Heads of our Churches, that is to say, between the Patriarch and the chairman of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany. Now such a meeting has become impossible.

- In Germany and in the Western society it has provoked a considerable incomprehension. Your Church appears to represent ultra-conservative forces.

- We will face it. The election of a chairperson is an internal affair of the Evangelical Church in Germany. We respect the right of choice for those who gave their votes to Ms Kaessmann. But we also have our own rights, particularly to define the format of our participation in dialogue when the circumstances have changed. The Patriarch cannot meet with a woman-‘bishop’.

- Is the matter of gender so important?

- This is not a matter of gender but a matter of attitude to the Christian tradition. We believe a woman cannot continue the line of apostolic succession as Orthodox and Catholic bishops do. Besides, a meeting between Patriarch Kirill and Ms Kaessmann would look like the recognition of female priesthood by our Church. Our faithful will not understand it, as in our understanding it is the church people who are the guardian of Orthodox faith.

- Ms Kaessmann has stated that the meaning of ecumenical dialogue lies precisely in

recognizing differences, in understanding the church order and the mission of the clergy. But you want to remove women from participation in the dialogue?

- No, women did participate earlier in the dialogue between our two Churches, but as priests, not as bishops. In November and December we were to celebrate the 50th anniversary of our dialogue in Moscow and in Berlin. After the election of Ms Kaessmann happened, I proposed that the celebrations in Moscow be held in the planned format so that Bishop Wolfgang Huber could come to Moscow. But as it was difficult for me personally to come to Berlin in this situation I suggested that the celebrations in Berlin be led by my vice-chairman. In response to that the Evangelical Church in Germany, failing even to contact me personally, declared all the celebrations cancelled. I regret that and I do not think one should react in this way.

- Apparently your proposal to send a vice-chairman was considered an offense?

- May be. But such an impulsive reaction does not correspond to the level on which our relations have existed so far. I am ready to meet with representatives of the Evangelical Church in Germany, either in Germany or in Moscow.

- And with Ms Kaessmann?

- I think, with my counterpart in the Evangelical Church in Germany.

- Is it a man?

- Fortunately, it is. Bishop Martin Schindenhutte.

- Mr Margot Kaessmann and Bishop Martin Schindenhutte sent the Patriarch a letter asking to clarify his position. Is there already any answer to it?

- The authors of the letter will receive an answer signed by either the Patriarch or me.

- Relations with the Catholic Church are developing more harmoniously, though in the past there were a lot of differences between you.

- Not only there were but there are remaining differences. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the Greek Catholics in western Ukraine seized hundreds of churches, driving out thousands of Orthodox faithful. We are told that the Greek-Catholic Church is autonomous. But since the Greek-Catholic Church is part of the Catholic Church, we believe Rome should find a possibility for influencing the situation there.

I do not even doubt that your next question will be about a possible meeting between Pope Benedict XVI of Rome and Patriarch Kirill of Moscow.

- And when the 'summit' of the heads of the two Churches will take place?

- We do not exclude the possibility of such a meeting and hope very much that it will take place. Pope Benedict XVI is well aware of the existing difficulties and for this reason does not speed up the question of his meeting with the Patriarch, much less the question of his visit to Russia, as was done under his predecessor. We are grateful to him for this. Besides, we closely follow his statements and support him whenever he defends traditional Christian moral values. But a mere protocol meetings and handshaking before cameras is of no interest to us.

- What is then the interest?

- We want a breakthrough in our relationships. When the situation in western Ukraine radically improves, when we – Orthodox and Catholics agree once for all that we are not rivals who lure away believers from each others, then a meeting between the Pope of Rome and the Patriarch of Moscow will become possible. We are allies; we face the same challenge – the challenge of militant secularism.

- This militant secularism is localized, in your view, primarily in Russia or in the West?

- In the West. In Russia it is not an official ideology. It is present but our faithful oppose its manifestations, standing out for traditional values, such as family, childbearing and the value of human life.

- In what way the situation in the West is different?

- In particular, the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg intends to ban Crucifixes in Italian schools. And this is a violation of traditional Christian values.

-But then Muslim schoolgirls should be also allowed to come to school in headscarves.

- And why not? But there is another factor, which is the religion of a majority. For Saudi Arabia it is Islam, for Russia it is Orthodox Christianity. In Kursk, the miracle-working Icon of Our Lady the Sign, the main shrine of the Russian Orthodox diaspora, was met by over 60 000 people. On November 4, the Day of the People's Unity in Russia, we together with representatives of other religions organized a march in Red Square. The Patriarch walked in the first row, Muslim, Jewish and Buddhist leaders in the second. It was a sort of visible symbol: our society is multi-confessional but the Patriarch is the head of 'the majority Church'. He unites our faithful and helps the mechanism of interreligious cooperation to function effectively. The Patriarch should be in some sense the spiritual leader of all the people, not only Orthodox believers.

- Today the new Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, along with President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin are the most influential people in Russia. Doesn't it threaten the separation of church and state?

- Not at all. We do not interfere into politics, nor do we give recommendations as to whom to vote for. The Church is open for people of different political convictions.

- What is our attitude to today's internal Russian discussion on Stalin's personality?

- We should face the historical truth. There is irrefutable evidence that under Stalin there were mass repressions. We may not ever know the exact number of those repressed but it is a matter of millions of those who were executed by shooting, deprived of their property, driven away from their native land. It was a repressive system which eliminated its own people for several decades.

- But today there are voices in Russia saying that Stalin also has merits.

- The crimes I mentioned cannot be justified either by these merits or the victory in World War II. The victory was gained by the people, not Stalin.

- Your Eminence, thank you for the talk.

Questions were asked by Martin Derry, deputy editor-in-chief, Christian Neef and Matthias Schepp

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