



## **‘Tied by fate and faith’ – interview by Archbishop Hilarion, chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate department for external church relations, to the Time of Union web-newspaper**

*On the eve of the festive date – the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing of a Union Treaty between Russia and Belarus, Archbishop Hilarion gave an interview to the Time of Union web-newspaper.*

**- Your Eminence, what are, in your view, the most important projects of inter-state cooperation patronized today by the Russian Orthodox Church in Belarus?**

- The Russian Orthodox Church is legally separated from the state both in Russia and Belarus. Nevertheless, this does not prevent the Church and the state from working together to meet many challenges. One of the major aims of this cooperation is consolidation of the historical, spiritual and cultural kinship of Eastern Slavic nations. However, the agenda of many joint reflection-action conferences, youth rallies and educational actions has normally included other concerns as well, such as inter-religious and inter-cultural co-existence, interaction between traditional and liberal attitudes to the implementation of human rights and freedoms, peacemaking. I will refer to one of the most significant inter-state cooperation projects in which the Russian Orthodox Church has taken part. It is the joint efforts for preserving the environment, especially, for overcoming the consequences of the Chernobyl disaster. The Church and the state have undertaken not only to organize educational activities devoted to ecological problems and aimed to attract the international public's attention to the Chernobyl tragedy, but also to give spiritual and humanitarian support to those who live in the right-of-way zone and to those who were affected during the liquidation of the Chernobyl consequences.

**- What upset or, on the contrary, gratified you during your visit to Belarus? Can you judge by that trip what area in the Byelorussian Exarchate's work needs more attention from the Russian Orthodox Church leadership?**

- During that trip I was a witness to the great authority that the Russian Orthodox Church and its Exarch, Metropolitan Filaret, enjoy in the republic. Much in the Byelorussian Exarchate is organized in a model

fashion. First of all, it is the area of church-state relations formed in accordance with the Russian Orthodox Church's Basic Social Concept. This constructive cooperation between the Church and the state makes it possible not only to maintain a healthy moral climate in the Byelorussian society by asserting its commitment to traditional values but also to oppose the spiritual aggression coming from various sects and pseudo-church groups to which all the states in the post-Soviet space have been exposed to this or that extent. As for the problems, they are the same in Moscow and Minsk, as they are caused by our past decades when the faith in Christ was either forcibly eradicated from people's minds and hearts or, in any event, could not be confessed openly. Stemming from this are the tasks the Church is facing now. First of all, it is the inchurching of most of those who were baptized and claim to be Orthodox and a search for ways of bringing the word of God to all the sections of the society and a special concern for the ethical education of children and youth.

**- In Russia, the Orthodox Church has actively promoted the transfer of churches to the faithful. In Belarus, St. Sophia Cathedral in Polotsk, one of the most famous and honoured churches, is still officially a museum, which is regrettable. Can the Russian Orthodox Church act in this case as a mediator or initiator of the transfer of a church to the Church?**

- This is within the competence of the ruling bishop of the Polotsk diocese of the ROC Byelorussian Exarchate. Personally I would like to add that not only in Belarus but also in other countries in the post-Soviet space, some churches are still museums. It should never be forgotten that churches were built to celebrate and to offer the bloodless Sacrifice, and the faithful could come to drink from the life-giving source of church Sacraments. It was a great tragedy when the houses of God were turned into storehouses for fuels and lubricants, clubs, cinemas, etc. It should be recognized that it has been to a considerable extent through the efforts of museum workers that many monuments of Old Russian church architecture, such as the cathedral in Polotsk, have been preserved for ancestry. Now times have changed and there are no longer reasons for using for wrong purposes the buildings which were originally built for prayer.

**- Your Eminence, December the 8<sup>th</sup> marks the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing of the Treaty on the Creation of a Union State of Russia and Belarus. What is your vision of the future of this union?**

- Throughout centuries the Russians and Byelorussians were bound up by historical fate and Orthodox faith. Our nations make up a unified cultural, historical and spiritual space which cannot be divided by any political borders or opposing economic interests. Evidence to it is the very existence of the Russian-Byelorussian inter-state union which has stood the test of time. Certainly, it is not all as smooth as we

would wish. But if the interests of citizens in both countries are always put above political ambitions and partialities then the alliance will certainly have a good future. An example of a true union, which our countries should seek, is the Russian Orthodox Church which unites the faithful in Russia and Belarus and safeguards the spiritual unity of the peoples of Holy Russia.

**- What would you wish to our readers?**

-I would like to wish that the readers of your web-newspaper may make their own contribution to building lasting peace and good-neighbourly relations between our nations. May the Lord preserve you all through His grace, helping you to bear the life cross and strengthening you in your good initiatives.

*Marianna Nikolina*

*Interviewer*

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