Ethics as politics

Interview given by Archbishop Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate department for external church relations, to the December issue of Russkiy mir.

- In what way secular and ecclesial diplomacy are similar and different? What are priorities of the latter?

- External church and state relations are similar in that both ecclesial and secular diplomats have as their task to represent and defend the interests of church and state respectively, building dialogue with subjects of international relations.

However, the interests of the church and the state are essentially different. The state uses normally a pragmatic approach to external relations as it must ensure a favourable external background for the national society and lasting international peace. On the other hand, sometimes the external policy of a state may become hostage to its regime and seek to achieve dubious political aims.

It should also be borne in mind that the Church is a transnational body, an element of international intercourse as it unites people of various cultures and ethnic origins throughout the world – people who share the same faith. As the secular world cannot offer grounds for unity similar to the Christian faith, the international arena continues in many ways to remain a place of struggle between states for their national interests, while reliance on tradition makes church external relations more sustainable in both time and contents.

The primary task of the Church in its relations with the external world is to bear witness to the truth of Christ. To this end we inter into manifold external church contacts, cooperating with other religions, authorities in various countries and international and non-governmental organizations. Witness to the Truth is expressed in the Church's position on particular topical issues on the global agenda and in interreligious relations. This witness extends to almost all the spheres of the life of humanity. The teaching of the Church implies the need to respect the human personality, freedom and moral values which are called to keep the world from the triumph of evil and untruth. This is why in our external relations we consistently stand for ethical norms to be used in international relations. Traditional morality, which can become the only ground for a peaceful co-existence of people in a poly-cultural society, excludes moral indifference, egotism, consumerism, etc.

To bring this position home to as many people as possible – this is our priority in external policy.

- Does ecclesial diplomacy help to solve secular problems, that is, does your department help the Russian Foreign Ministry to solve problems and does the Foreign Ministry help you to solve problems of ecclesial diplomacy?

- In spite of a difference existing in approaches to international activity, there are certain problematic areas which sometimes require that the two structures join their efforts. Take for instance the joint efforts for developing dialogue between civilizations, cultures and religions and discussion on human rights and freedoms. Our common concerns include such problems as the preservation and consolidation of the Russian world and promotion of Russian language and culture in the far abroad countries. For a more effective cooperation between church and state in solving these and other problems, a special working group has been set up for cooperation between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian Federation Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Certainly, there are cases where the Moscow Patriarchate and the Foreign Ministry have to resort to mutual support in areas of their exclusive competence. Thus, in the task of strengthening inter-Orthodox contacts, a considerable role belongs to pilgrimages made by the faithful of one Local Orthodox Church to holy places in the canonical territory of another Local Orthodox Church. The Russian Orthodox Church can ensure adequate conditions for such trips only with the help of the Foreign Ministry.

State diplomats, in their turn, who are responsible for Russia's relations with other countries, have often made requests to us for information about the religious situation in a region of their concern. Besides it may happen that the Moscow Patriarchate's contacts with traditional religious communities of a particular country prove to be the only link between this country and Russia.

- What is the difference between a Foreign Office functionary and a DECR functionary?

- In my view, the tern 'functionary' is not quite acceptable with regard to a church worker. Indeed, this term in most languages mean a public or municipal servant bound up by the virtue of office with governmental bodies, while a person working in the service of the Church, which is separated from the state organizationally and functionally, cannot be termed as functionary.

Thus, the primary requirement of a worker at the Department for External Church Relations is his or her Orthodox faith. It is a prerequisite, since without it a person cannot fully realize and carry out the priority task of a church organization which is to bear witness to the Truth of Christ before the external world, whereas to be employed by the Russian Foreign Office one does not have to meet the requirement of religious affiliation. It is quite natural since Russian citizens are not only those who are Orthodox but also people of other religions or non-believers.

But there are also some similarities between DECR and Foreign Ministry representatives. They include in particular a common understanding of how important it is to settle global problems by means of a mutually respectful dialogue. The bulk of the work carried out by both those who serve in the Department and the Ministry lies in a serious analysis of political, social and religious situation abroad, in considering projects open for cooperation, in working with individual requests, etc.

- A secular diplomat is trained in the Institute for International Relations, and where is a church diplomat trained?

- The Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church resolved last March that a Church Post-Graduate and Doctoral School dedicated to Sts Cyril and Methodius be established for training, among others, specialists in church diplomacy and governance. Training in this area is carried out by DECR workers who are qualified as ecclesial diplomats.

It is planned to involve not only our own but also other's resources in raising the quality of training for our post-graduate students.

- In former republics of the USSR, especially in Ukraine, the Russian Orthodox Church is seen as 'a hand of the Kremlin. Why, in your view, this opinion is current? What is the Church going to undertake to destroy this stereotype?

- This opinion does exist in some separatist-minded circles. It is totally wrong, however. The Church does work together with the Russian state in such areas as education or various social programs, but not in the area of 'high' politics. His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, during his meeting with the Belarus President, noted that 'a Patriarch of All Russia is not a Patriarch of the Russian Federation or any other country... Holy Russia and her historical heritage are present in various states today'. Therefore, it is wrong to speak of the Russian Orthodox Church as 'the Kremlin's hand'.

What is needed to overcome false stereotypes is objective information about what happens in the Church and what its position is on a particular issue. The church mass media is responsible for preparing and disseminating this information. For a more effective work in this area, the Holy Synod of the Russian Church has established a Synodal Department of Information.

- Last year when the 1020th anniversary of the Baptism of Russia was celebrated in Kiev, Ukrainian leaders wanted to induce the Patriarchate of Constantinople to help create a united Ukrainian Orthodox Church. But the Ecumenical Patriarch did not do it, but called people to unite around the Russian Orthodox Church. Is church diplomacy to be credited with this development?

- A very important event happened during the celebrations to mark the 1020th anniversary of the Baptism of Russia as the unity of Orthodoxy was manifested not only in words but also in deeds. The merit belongs to primates of Local Sister Churches, His Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople and the late Patriarch Alexy II of Moscow and All Russia. Their con-celebration of the Divine Liturgy on St. Vladimir's Hill together with an assembly of Orthodox hierarchs from other Local Churches in presence of a multitude of worshippers became truly a pan-Orthodox festivity in which the historical relations of the Russian Orthodox Church with the Patriarchate of Constantinople and, more topical, the common will to preserve the unity of Orthodoxy on the basis of common ecclesiastical rules – canons, were expressed. Taking part in preparing the celebrations were appropriate church departments including the Moscow Patriarchate department for external church relations.

- Last year the Russian Federation recognized the sovereignty of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and the Abkhazian clergy asked to be taken in the fold of the Russian Orthodox Church. But the Moscow Patriarchate refrained from such a step, thus preserving good relations with the Georgian Orthodox Church. Did the secular Russian authorities treat with understanding this position of the Russian Orthodox Church with regard of the Abkhazian problem? What is the reaction of the Russian Church to the announcement by Abkhazian priests that a local church is founded in Abkhazia? What will be the actions of the Russian Orthodox Church, that is, does it recognize this church or will it search for another way out of the situation?

- The position of the Russian Orthodox Church on the church problem in Abkhazia has been known for a

long time and it has not changed as a result of the recent events. In fact, it is treated with understanding by state officials including the Russian Federation Ministry of Foreign Affairs. We are doing everything possible to continue dialogue with the Georgian Orthodox Church and the Abkhazian clergy in a constrictive and peaceful spirit.

As far as the search for ways of resolving the situation is concerned, this is a long and complicated process requiring a delicate approach and patience. All those involved in it should avoid one-sided actions and steps which can do damage to the dialogue as the only possible way for finding a final solution of this problem.

- You have recently met with the head of the Roman Catholic Church. What are relations between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Vatican at present, that is, have they become better under Benedict XVI than they were under John Paul II? What have you agreed on? Did you consider a possibility for a meeting between the Pope and Patriarch Kirill?

- We feel respect for Pope Benedict XVI as a prominent theologian and pastor who is not afraid of defending the fundamental principles of Christian faith and life in face of the secular world, which often seems alien to Christianity. The bold statements of Benedict XVI are sometimes met with disapproval of representatives of the Western political world and mass media for the reason that they do not fit in the principle of 'political correctness' dominating today. During my visit to Rome I publicly expressed support for the Pope of Rome's consistent defence of traditional Christian values in face of unbelief spreading in the Western society today, religious indifference and naked discrimination against Christians.

It should be mentioned that with the election of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger as Pope of Rome in 2005, a certain shift has shaped in relations between the Roman Catholic and the Russian Orthodox Churches. Among other things, the Joint Commission for Orthodox-Catholic Theological Dialogue has resumed its work after a break under the Pope John Paul II because of unfair actions committed Greek Catholics against the Orthodox in Eastern Europe. Pope Benedict XVI himself is thoroughly familiar with problems considered in the theological dialogue between our two Churches, since he took part in the work of the Joint Commission as cardinal in the 1980s, representing the Catholic side.

During my meeting with Pope Benedict XVI, we dealt with a wide range of issues including the task of the common witness of the Orthodox and Catholics to traditional Christian values.

We agreed that our common witness to the ideals of the gospel was possible and even necessary as the

position of the Orthodox and the Catholic Churches on such problems as family, motherhood, population crisis, euthanasia and other ethical issues coincide, while many Protestant communities, influenced by secular ideas, have embarked on the path of liberalization of Christian teaching. In this connection, we pointed to the need to develop bilateral Orthodox-Catholic relations in the area of culture so important for Christians' discussion with the secular world and non-believes.

Concerning the problem which unfortunately still remain in relations between our two Churches, I reminded the Pope of Rome of the continued difficult situation in Western Ukraine where, as a result of forcible actions committed by the Greek Catholics in the period from the 1980s to 1990s, three Orthodox dioceses – those of Lvov, Ternopol and Ivano-Frankovsk – were actually destroyed. Since that time there has been no relaxation of inter-confessional tension to speak about. I said that this situation remains a serious obstacle for a meeting between the Pope of Rome and the Patriarch of Moscow. I would like to hope that concrete measures will be taken at last to resolve the conflict between the Greek Catholics and the Orthodox in Western Ukraine as well to solve other problems.

- What is the status of the Russian Orthodox Church in international arena, that is, is the Church influential in the world?

- Traditionally the influence of a state in the world is determined by its economic and military power. The Church does not seek to acquire either.

We are present in the international sphere not to acquire an influence but to bring the word of the Truth to people, to point to the importance of the moral dimension of human life and of spiritual and cultural values in building a sustainable human common life in justice. Evidence to it is the participation of the Church's representatives in many international organizations and their statements at major public forums and on pages of respectful editions.

The address of His Holiness Patriarch Alexy II to the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly in 2007 became a serious political event in the life of Europe, which was met with a broad public response. In this address he set forth the church understanding of major problems of human rights as the central concern of this organization. Today the world community is ready to listen to the opinion of the Church on various problems. I hope therefore that the position of the Church will be taken into account in making decision affecting the further development of the global society.

The interview was taken by Pavel Korobov

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