



Archbishop Hilarion of Volokolamsk explains problems and prospects of relations between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church in a talk with foreign journalists

During his meeting with foreign media people on 11 November 2009, Archbishop Hilarion spoke on burning issues of inter-Christian relations. He said in particular that considerable improvements took shape in relations with the Roman Catholic Church in recent years. 'There is a regular mechanism of mutual consultations and high-level visits... We can state that we are moving towards the moment when the preparation of a meeting between the Pope of Rome and the Patriarch of Moscow will become possible. I would like to underline that we have no concrete plans concerning the venue and date of this meetings but the both sides show a desire to prepare it', he said.

According to His Eminence Hilarion, this meeting should serve to find 'a common platform' for issues of bilateral relations, which are still disputable or divisive. 'As soon as it is found and appropriate agreements are prepared to be signed by the two Churches, this meeting will become possible', he said.

'The most important problem in our relations is that of Western Ukraine and the actions of the Greek-Catholic structures, which destroyed the fragile inter-confessional balance in the early 1990s to create the still remaining grave situation', the archbishop said, reminding the journalists that during the last years of the Soviet Union's existence, the Greek Catholics began to capture Orthodox churches en masse. These actions entailed violence, bloodshed and mutual accusations as many Orthodox churches were seized to remain in the hands of the Greek-Catholics to this day.

'We do not say that this process should be turned back and the Greek Catholic churches should be returned to the Russian Orthodox Church, but we say it is necessary to arrange a mechanism of cooperation which could help to relieve the inter-confessional tension', the DECR chairman stressed, adding, 'and where the Orthodox faithful are deprived of their churches and have no opportunity to celebrate, there steps should be taken to provide them with churches for divine services.

'This mechanism can well be established and it was established once, in the early 90s, but the Greek Catholics withdrew from it unilaterally. Therefore we expect some constructive steps to be taken', His Eminence said. He also noted that this problem was discussed during his meeting with Pope Benedict XVI and the Prefect of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches, Cardinal Sandri, who is responsible for cooperation with the Greek Catholics. 'I hope that our repeatedly-expressed concern will be met with

understanding and we will be able to find an algorithm of common actions which will make it possible to bring a longed-for peace in that region', the DECR chairman said.

Asked whether the visible rapprochement with the Roman Catholic Church had anything to do with the personality of the His Holiness Patriarch Kirill, Archbishop Hilarion noted that positive changes in relations between the two Churches began after Benedict XVI became Pope of Rome.

'He is a very restrained and traditional man; he does not aim at expanding the Roman Catholic Church into traditionally Orthodox regions', His Eminence Hilarion stressed, telling the journalists that immediately after he was elected to the papal see Benedict XVI met with Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad in his capacity of DECR chairman and removed the question of his visit to Russia from his agenda since such a visit is impossible today. 'A mechanism of more trustful relations was formed to give hope that these relations will improve further', he added.

'After Metropolitan Kirill became Patriarch Kirill, we can hope for further steps in this direction since he will continue the same policy of cooperation with Christians of other confessions he pursued as DECR chairman', Archbishop Hilarion continued, 'But you should understand that we do not expect any rapprochement with the Catholics in the field of theology. We participate in the theological dialogue, but it seems to be difficult and long as there are many difficulties and reefs'.

He underlined that it was important to achieve cooperation with the Roman Catholic Church in the fields of work which concern people's life and welfare. 'The traditionally-minded Christians – and the Orthodox and the Catholics are the first among such today – have before them a task of defending Christian ethics and developing a common response to the challenges that the present time hurls at our two Churches. Here there is a large room for cooperation'.

Archbishop Hilarion cited as an example the decision of the European Court for Human Rights that the presence of Crucifix was inadmissible in Italian schools. 'We are in full solidarity with the Roman Catholic Church and the Italian Government which have already expressed their concern over this decision', he stated, adding, 'We believe the work of the European Court for Human Rights should not be turned into a farce. We do not think that the extremely liberal mood expressed in this decision should prevail in Europe'.

The DECR chairman reminded his audience that Europe had Christian roots and Crucifix was a universal symbol and expressed the conviction that it was utterly inadmissible to deprive Europe and its social institutions of the symbols which served to consolidate people for centuries just to please liberals and atheists. 'Crucifix has never been a symbol of violence; it has always been a symbol of reconciliation. I believe in all areas of this kind we can maintain very close cooperation with the Catholic

Church in defending traditional Christianity against militant secularism and aggressive liberalism', the archbishop stated.

Asked about the extent to which the problem of proselytism remains relevant in relations between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church, His Eminence Hilarion said in particular, 'The theme of proselytism should be excluded from relations between the Orthodox and the Catholics because we should not lure away the faithful from each other. We should rather develop mechanism of common witness to Christ and realise that we face the same strategic tasks.

'Therefore we should enhance the positive potential and meet more often to discuss common problems and create a mechanism of cooperation that keeps our solidarity on all basic social and moral problems', Archbishop Hilarion continued, noting that the problem of proselytism was not as acute today as it was ten years ago. 'Today the Roman Catholic Church is aware that proselytism is inadmissible and this awareness exists not only on the official level but also among ordinary missionaries and members of Catholic monastic orders', he said, adding that there were a special bilateral commission for considering particular cases of proselytism. 'I would say therefore that it is the theme of *Unia* that remains today the main stumbling block in our Orthodox-Catholic relations', he stressed.

He also told the journalists about his trip to Rome and his meeting with Pope Benedict XVI. 'My visit to Rome was very meaningful and the talk I had with Pope Benedict XVI was quite long; it lasted for an hour. We discussed the whole range of problems existing in relations between our two Churches and common tasks we could carry out together', he said.

He also remarked that the preparation of a meeting between the Pope of Rome and the Patriarch of Moscow was a process which the both sides were interested in. 'But we are not interested in the fact of this meeting but in having this meeting, if it takes place, to mark a certain new stage in our relations. It is what we are seeking to bring our bilateral dialogue to. I believe as soon as preconditions for such a breakthrough emerge all the obstacles for a meeting between the Pope and the Patriarch will be removed'.

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