



The Lord Has Entrusted Us With a Church That Has Existed for 1,000 Years



Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, the Chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations, answered questions from the Greek newspaper **Kathimerini** on the breaking off of Eucharistic Communion, Russian Church unity, and the Council of Crete.

—How do you assess the situation in world Orthodoxy after the Cyprus crisis? It seems the Russian Orthodox Church is planning to cut off communication with those Churches that recognize the autocephaly of the OCU. What will happen?

—I consider the situation in world Orthodoxy to be very dangerous, critical, and sad. A schism of world Orthodoxy has occurred. It was initiated by Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, and, unfortunately, we see that this schism is still deepening.

I would like to emphasize one thing that is very important for us: The Russian Orthodox Church is observing the development of this schism with regret and sorrow, but it does not participate in it—the schism is happening outside its canonical limits. And when they say to us, “Let’s think of compromise

solutions,” we first of all ask ourselves: The Lord has entrusted us with a Church that has existed for more than 1,000 years—it is one Church, the canonical jurisdiction of which extends to Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and other neighboring states. We received this Church as an inheritance from our ancestors—so what right do we have now to squander this heritage, or, as we say in Russia, to tear it apart?

On the contrary, we are concerned with the strengthening of the unity of our Church, and we can see the striking unity of the episcopate, clergy, and laity throughout its canonical territory. We see the unity of the episcopate of Russia and Ukraine despite the difficult relations that presently exist on the political level between the two countries. And when they tell us to give autocephaly to the Ukrainian Church and then all problems will be resolved, I want to ask: First, what problems can be solved this way, and second, why should we impose autocephaly on the Ukrainian Church if it doesn't want it?

The Ukrainian Church has very clearly stated through the mouth of its own episcopate that it is fully satisfied with the self-governing status it has today. The idea of autocephaly is very unpopular among the Church people, especially since it is completely discredited by the schismatics. How can we talk about autocephaly in this situation?

We will continue to strengthen the internal unity of our Church, and what our brothers in the Cypriot, Greek, and Alexandrian Churches do—let it remain on their conscience. They will answer for it before God. And we in the Russian Church will give an answer before God for whether we preserved or destroyed the unity of our Church.

There's something else I'd like to say. We are not breaking communion with the Churches—we remain in communion with all hierarchs of the Local Orthodox Churches who stand guard over the canonical Tradition of the Church and do not recognize the Ukrainian schismatics. This is what we will continue to do. We break communion only with those primates and hierarchs who enter into communion with the schism, and we do this because the holy canons command us to do so. We cannot recognize people who have no canonical consecration as people with whom we can enter into Eucharistic communion.

—Can this question be solved as conflicts between the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Russian Orthodox Church have been solved in the past? In particular, there is the example of Estonia immediately after the collapse of the USSR. There are also voices, including those of well-known figures such as Archbishop Anastasios of Albania, calling for certain initiatives to find a compromise. Is there such hope? You met with Archbishop Elpidophoros in New York— was that the beginning of a dialogue?

—We are open to dialogue, but the Patriarch of Constantinople closed the door to it. When Patriarch

Kirill went to Constantinople in August 2018 to personally meet with Patriarch Bartholomew, they spoke for more than two hours. I was present at this meeting, where Patriarch Kirill laid out the real situation for Patriarch Bartholomew.

Patriarch Bartholomew was misinformed, first by the Ukrainian schismatics, second by the Ukrainian authorities of that time, and third, by his incompetent advisers. For some reason he was sure that as soon as the “tomos of autocephaly” was signed, many hierarchs of the Ukrainian Church would immediately join the newly-created “church.” Patriarch Bartholomew told us that, according to their information, twenty-five hierarchs were already prepared to do this. Patriarch Kirill responded that one or two bishops would switch. And indeed, out of nearly 100 hierarchs, only two—one diocesan and one vicar bishop—moved into this so-called church created on the basis of schismatics.

Among the disciples of Jesus Christ were the twelve apostles, one of whom was Judas. We had nearly 100 hierarchs in the Ukrainian Church (now there are more than 100), and two of them turned out to be traitors. So, the percentage of betrayal in our Ukrainian Orthodox Church is much lower.

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church has always existed. It is a huge Church with 12,500 parishes, more than 250 monasteries, thousands of clerics, more than 100 hierarchs, and millions of faithful. The episcopate, clergy, and laity are a very close-knit community, and none of them want to join any supposedly autocephalous “church” created on the basis of schismatic structures.

If we talk about a compromise and compare the situation with Estonia, we have to keep in mind that the situation was somewhat different there. In Estonia, the Patriarch of Constantinople, in his words, “recreated” the jurisdiction that existed in the interwar period, and not on the basis of schismatics who had no canonical consecrations—some clergy of the Russian Orthodox Church entered the “recreated” jurisdiction, and a bishop with a canonical consecration from the Patriarchate of Constantinople was sent to head it. Therefore, the initial conditions for negotiations were different from the very beginning. Negotiations were held and a compromise was reached. At the same time, it must be said that Constantinople still has not fulfilled the agreements that were reached during the negotiations. Nevertheless, we managed to stop the division that had arisen, and the problem, although not resolved, did not prevent us from having Eucharistic communion with Constantinople in recent years.

In Ukraine, we see something completely different. The Patriarchate of Constantinople invaded the canonical territory of the Russian Orthodox Church. Now Constantinople tells us, it turns out that for more than 300 years, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church was part of the Patriarchate of Constantinople and was only temporarily transferred to the jurisdiction of Moscow. But we have published a whole volume of documents that testify to the contrary. Metropolitan Nikiforos of Kykkos and Tellyria in Cyprus recently published a book

with documents that, again, clearly testify that during these more than 300 years, the Ukrainian Church was part of the Moscow Patriarchate.

Look at the calendars of the Church of Constantinople in 2018, 2017, 2016, and all the preceding years—you'll see the Ukrainian Orthodox Church headed by His Beatitude Metropolitan Onufry as part of the Moscow Patriarchate. There is no mention of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. Then suddenly Patriarch Bartholomew declares that, it turns out, it's the canonical territory of the Patriarchate of Constantinople.

Imagine you have a house where you live with your children, where your parents lived, and your grandparents, and all your ancestors for more than 300 years. And suddenly someone comes and says: "You know, many years ago, our family gave this house for your family to use temporarily. We have found some documents, so get out of the house, and we're going to settle new people here." This is basically what happened in Ukraine.

Now the Patriarchate of Constantinople says that he only "condescends to tolerate" the presence of His Beatitude Metropolitan Onufry and the Church he heads in Ukraine. It's impossible to imagine a more absurd situation.

—Let's focus a little on the situation in Ukraine. What is the position there of the canonical, as you say, Church (which belongs to the Russian Orthodox Church) in comparison with that which was created by the Ecumenical Patriarch? You refer to the fact that the majority of believers recognize Vladyka Onufry. You also talk about oppression, which the general public knows little about. Perhaps you're just exaggerating the situation with the nationalists and the supporters of autocephaly? Could you say more about this?

—I'll start with the official statistics published by the Ukrainian state authorities. According to this information, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, a self-governing Church within the Moscow Patriarchate, numbers 12,500 parishes, while the two schismatic jurisdictions together have about 6,000. As for monasteries, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church has more than 250, and all the largest monasteries—the Kiev Caves Lavra, the Pochaev Lavra, the Svyatogorsk Lavra—are in the canonical Church. The schismatic jurisdictions have, in the best-case scenario, a few dozen monasteries. And all you have to do is visit these monasteries to see where there are monastics and where not. Monasticism in Ukraine actually exists only in the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church—the schismatics have almost no monasticism as such.

To understand the situation with the faithful going to church, I think it's enough just to go to Kiev, to go to the Kiev Caves Lavra on a Sunday and see how many people are there. I'll also mention this fact:

Every year, on the eve of the feast of the Baptism of Rus', there is a large cross procession organized by the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church without any pressure from outside—to the contrary, the faithful are pressured to not join in this procession, to not go to Kiev. You can look at the photos, the videos—there are tens and hundreds of thousands of people. About 300,000 faithful gather in a cross procession on this day. Therefore, only wishful thinkers could say that we're exaggerating something. We have the numbers, the video footage, the official Ukrainian statistics. So, we rely on reality, not on some fantasy.

If we talk about the persecution of the clergy of the canonical Church, such persecution definitely took place during the time of Poroshenko's presidency. There were raider seizures of churches and priests were attacked. Again, this is all documented: There are numbers, videos of these attacks and the beatings of clerics. As we've heard in the media, Patriarch Bartholomew is planning to go to Ukraine next year. I hope that in his undoubtedly very busy schedule he will find half an hour to meet with the families of priests who were thrown out of their churches. Let him meet with them himself and hear what really happened.

—You systematically criticize the Ecumenical Patriarchate for initiating the autocephaly and, moreover, the schism within Orthodoxy. Perhaps there is at least some fault on the part of the Russian Orthodox Church? I'm thinking about how Constantinople accuses you quite often of not going to the Crete Council, although you participated in the preparations up to the last minute.

—I think that part of the blame indeed does lie with us, and I must confess that we made one very big mistake. The topic of autocephaly was discussed throughout the entire pre-conciliar process, but we didn't manage to find complete harmony on this topic. Basically, we agreed that in the future, autocephaly would not be granted solely by decision of the Ecumenical Patriarch, that the granting of autocephaly would be possible only with the consent of all the Local Churches. It remained only to agree on the form of the signatures under the tomos of autocephaly—no agreement was reached on this point. So what happened next? Patriarch Bartholomew sent a letter to the Local Orthodox Churches with a proposal to remove the topic of autocephaly from the agenda and to hold the pan-Orthodox Council. We agreed with this proposal, and that was our great mistake.

We believed Patriarch Bartholomew, who publicly, in front of all the delegations of the Local Churches said: "We recognize Metropolitan Onufry and welcome him as the sole canonical head of Orthodoxy in Ukraine." Those were his words, and we believed his words. We thought: "Since the Ecumenical Patriarch says this, let's hold a council, and then, as he promised, we will continue to discuss the topic of autocephaly." We shouldn't have believed him; he deceived us. This was our great mistake.

As for our non-participation in the Crete Council, you well know how events unfolded. First the Bulgarian Church refused to participate, then the Antiochian Church, then the Georgian Church. Then the Serbian Church said the Council should be postponed. In a situation where four Churches have practically refused to participate, what are we to do?

We always insist that a pan-Orthodox Council should be truly pan-Orthodox, and if any decision is made in the absence of even one Church, it won't be legitimate for the fullness of Orthodoxy. And suddenly we hear that one Church refuses, another, a third, and the fourth says the Council should be postponed...

Then Patriarch Kirill wrote a letter to Patriarch Bartholomew with a request to hold an urgent pre-conciliar meeting to resolve the existing issues and still invite these Churches to the Council. He received an answer from Patriarch Bartholomew—I have it before me right now—No. 676 from June 9, which says: “The new, extraordinary pan-Orthodox pre-conciliar meeting proposed by your holy Church is considered impossible, because there is no regulatory framework for its convocation.” Who considered it impossible? Why was it impossible? There were still two weeks before the council. Why was it impossible to adopt measures so everyone could participate in the Council?

Having learned that three Churches were not participating, we said then we weren't going either. Now they tell us, had you gone to the Crete Council, none of the subsequent events would have happened. I heard it from practically every Greek bishop I met with. Excuse me, but why wouldn't it have happened? It means Patriarch Bartholomew wanted to take revenge on us this way? He decided to give “autocephaly” to the schismatics and “legalize” the anathematized Philaret Denisenko out of a sense of revenge? If you think this is really the case, then what can be said here?

Had we gone to the Crete Council, then, first of all, we would have said that the Council had no legitimacy, because three Churches were absent. So the Council would have fallen through. Having arrived, we would have had to leave.

I would like to remind those who claim that we didn't want to go from the very beginning that we had been preparing for the pan-Orthodox Council since 1961. A list of 100 topics for the Council was compiled that year, and we worked on all of them. Then they said the list has been reduced to ten topics, and we accepted this. Later they said the topic of diptychs was being dropped because it was too difficult; we also came to terms with this. In the end, they told us the topic of autocephaly also had to be removed because we hadn't come to an agreement on it. Again, we reconciled ourselves to this. The whole time, we made concessions, obeying the decisions that were made without our participation. As the aforementioned letter said, it was “considered impossible.” But who considered it so? The Patriarchate of Constantinople.

Throughout the entire pre-conciliar process, we proposed to create an inter-Orthodox secretariat of the Council, but this was not done—all the preparation was carried out at the Phanar. And when we went to these meetings, they gave us prepared documents and we began to discuss them. The preparatory process itself was very poorly organized—in reality, the Local Churches were only invited for passive participation. And the poorly-prepared Council ended poorly.

—You mentioned Vladyka Onuphry, his recognition, and so on. But then again, it's often noted that in the 1990s, Metropolitan Onuphry himself signed the letter asking for autocephaly. Perhaps you just pressured him and forced him to stick to a position in favor of the Russian Orthodox Church?

—If you knew His Beatitude Metropolitan Onuphry, then you would understand that he is a person who cannot be pressured at all. He makes decisions as his hierarchical conscience tells him and as the Holy Spirit tells him.

What happened in the early 1990s? Philaret Denisenko, then the Metropolitan of Kiev in the Russian Orthodox Church, assumed he would become the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia. He was already the locum tenens of the Patriarchal throne, but the Local Council did not elect him as Patriarch. He harbored great resentment and decided to become “patriarch” in Ukraine. Soon after his return to Ukraine, having secured the support of then-President Kravchuk, Philaret Denisenko demanded that the Ukrainian Church be given autocephaly. He convinced the episcopate of the Ukrainian Church that it was necessary to sign this letter.

Vladyka Onuphry was young then, just consecrated as a bishop. He signed the letter together with everyone, and then, when they began to understand, when they saw that it was all done to divide the Ukrainian Church from the Russian Church, that everything was happening under pressure from the secular authorities, the bishops one by one began to withdraw their signatures, including Bishop Onuphry, now His Beatitude, the Metropolitan of Kiev and All Ukraine.

If someone suggests that we are pressuring him now, well, excuse me, but we don't have any means of doing so—neither political, nor financial, nor administrative. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church is self-governing, with its own episcopate, its own Synod, and they independently elect their bishops. The only thing that remains is the historical prayerful connection between the Ukrainian Church and the Russian Church, but the Ukrainian Orthodox Church doesn't want to lose this connection, and therefore it doesn't want autocephaly. Moreover, it doesn't want autocephaly on the basis of schismatics. Therefore, statements that we are exerting some kind of pressure are absolutely untrue.

—Still, one of the arguments for autocephaly is that Ukraine has been an independent state for a long time now. Perhaps the Russian Orthodox Church just dreams of somehow preserving an empire that doesn't actually exist?

—We're not interested in any empire—we're interested in the Church that exists in reality, that is, the united Russian Orthodox Church, which has more than 100 million faithful, more than 40,000 parishes, and about 1,000 monasteries. We want to preserve it regardless of what political borders arise on the canonical space of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Political borders have changed many times throughout the thousand years of the Russian Church's existence, but we don't believe the emergence of new borders should lead to the Church being divided up. Otherwise, we'd have to divide the Russian Church into fifteen parts, the Antiochian Church into two or three, the Church of Jerusalem into three or four, and the Alexandrian Church into more than fifty parts. After all, there are more than fifty states in Africa. Why is there only one Church?

Therefore, we don't see the need to listen to political arguments. We have to listen to the will of the episcopate, the clergy, and the Church people. How did any autocephaly in Church history begin? With this or that Church declaring its desire to receive independence. This process did not always go smoothly. And unlike what the hierarchs of the Patriarchate of Constantinople are indoctrinating everyone with now, Constantinople certainly did not grant autocephaly in every case.

For example, the Russian Church did not receive any tomos of autocephaly from the Church of Constantinople. We've been living without such a tomos for more than 500 years now. The Russian Church proclaimed its autocephaly when the Patriarch of Constantinople signed the union with Rome, that is, there was not an Orthodox patriarch on the throne of Constantinople, but a Uniate patriarch. Then our bishops had to gather and elect their metropolitan without the sanction of Constantinople. Then the Patriarchate was established in Rus', and when it happened, gramotas were received, signed not by the Ecumenical Patriarch alone, but by all the eastern patriarchs. They recognized the Moscow Patriarch as fifth in the diptychs, and recognized him precisely in the rank of patriarch.

Therefore, those who now tell us that the Patriarch of Constantinople, you see, had the right to grant autocephaly to Ukraine are incorrect. He had no such right. It cannot be done without the consent of the Ukrainian Church people and the Ukrainian episcopate, and without the consent of the Russian Church.

He deliberately violated the canons of the Church in order to harm the Russian Orthodox Church, as, unfortunately, has happened in the past. For example, when the revolution happened in Russia, the Renovationist schism emerged, and at first, then-Patriarch Meletios (Metaxakis) of Constantinople did not support this schism, but his successor Patriarch Gregory VII actually supported the Renovationists

through his representative in Moscow.

We have documentary evidence of this. For example, a letter was sent to our Patriarch-confessor St. Tikhon, which said: “We suggest that you immediately renounce the Patriarchal throne and we consider that the Patriarchate in Russia should be abolished.” These actions were undertaken by Constantinople at a time when the Russian Church was facing persecutions that the whole world knew about. Our priests were being shot, our churches blown up, our monasteries destroyed—and the Patriarch of Constantinople supported the schism within the Russian Church.

And now the Patriarchate of Constantinople has supported the schism within the Ukrainian Church.

—You know that Constantinople accuses the Russian Orthodox Church of systematically undermining its ecumenical status, including by cultivating the theory of “Third Rome.” A whole book on this was published in Greece saying you want to somehow lead Orthodoxy in the world, because you have the largest flock. Is there any truth to this?

—There is not a single drop of truth in these claims, except that we are indeed the most numerous Church. This fact is not something we get proud about, but something that imposes great responsibility upon us for our flock, for preserving its unity.

If to touch upon the overblown mythology about the Russian Church, including the accusation that we supposedly preach the “Third Rome” theory, then provide at least one official document of our Church, one decision of our Church Council, the words of the Patriarch, or, for example, my speeches, which would say that we recognize Moscow as the Third Rome. There are none. This was an idea formulated several centuries ago and long since left in the past. It’s of no interest to us, as we have no desire to lead world Orthodoxy. We are quite satisfied with the place we occupy.

We officially recognized the primacy of the Patriarch of Constantinople when the document “On Primacy in the Universal Church” was written and adopted at the Bishops’ Council of the Russian Orthodox Church in 2013. It says there in black and white that we recognize the Patriarch of Constantinople as first among equals in the family of the primates of the Local Orthodox Churches. But we recognize him as first in honor, not first in power. We don’t believe that the Patriarch of Constantinople has any authority outside his canonical jurisdiction or has the right to interfere in the internal life of the other Local Churches—we categorically disagree with such ideas.

The document I’m talking about was adopted in 2013, when we were in unity with the Patriarch of Constantinople, but now this Patriarch is not to be found in our diptychs. Now there is a different ecclesiological situation, reminiscent of situations that arose in the past, for example, when Patriarch

Nestorius of Constantinople was teaching in the fifth century that the Theotokos must be called the Christotokos. The Third Ecumenical Council was called, which the Patriarch of Constantinople certainly did not preside over. He was accused there and was condemned for his heresy. Then another Patriarch of Constantinople was elected. So, history knows situations when the Church existed without an Orthodox patriarch on the throne in Constantinople.

Let us also recall that in the mid-fifteenth century, the Russian Church became autocephalous because the Patriarch of Constantinople had signed the union with Rome; that is, at that moment, there was not an Orthodox patriarch on the throne in Constantinople.

The Russian Orthodox Church perceives today's situation the same way. Many Orthodox believers are now saying there is no Orthodox patriarch in Constantinople because the Patriarch of Constantinople has joined the schismatics. All of Russia, the entire Russian Orthodox Church has seen pictures where Patriarch Bartholomew is concelebrating with the leader of the Ukrainian schism. I think this situation has a very adverse impact on the overall climate of inter-Orthodox relations. But I repeat: It's incorrect to say that we break communion with one, another, or a third Church. We don't break communion with Churches, but stand for the canonical tradition of the Church and uphold the unity of the Russian Orthodox Church. We will never depart from this path.

—You have often spoken about pressure from outside on the decisions of the Patriarch of Constantinople. As I understand it, you are referring to American diplomacy, which has made the topic of Ukraine one of its top initiatives. In the end, the Patriarch in Constantinople lives in an Islamic environment. He needs some kind of diplomatic support. He turned to the United States, for example. The Russian Orthodox Church also works very closely with the Russian government, with embassies, with the Minister of Foreign Affairs. Why can't others work with state structures, but the Russian Orthodox Church can, for example?

—It's very simple. Every primate of a Local Church decides who to work with. If such work is aimed at defending the interests of his Church, at preserving the unity of Orthodoxy, then why not work together? Why shouldn't the Russian Church work with the Russian government in building churches in Russia, teaching theology in universities, in ensuring that people have free access to religion, to the Church?

If we were talking about the Patriarch of Constantinople working with the United States to preserve Orthodox sacred treasures, to defend its interests on its own canonical territory, would anyone object? I think not. But when the Patriarch of Constantinople relies on eternal forces for actions aimed at destroying Orthodoxy unity, at damaging the Local Orthodox Churches, of course we can't agree with this. As for the Russian Orthodox Church, we're not invading anywhere, not taking anything away from anyone. We only take care to preserve the Church we have received from our forebears.

Here the interviewer asks about Russia's ties with Turkey and why more was not done about the recent Agia Sophia crisis. Metropolitan Hilarion notes that Patriarch Kirill was the first primate to speak out, then the Holy Synod expressed its concern, and then President Putin expressed concern directly to Erdogan. The conversion of Agia Sophia and the Chora Monastery into mosques is a great tragedy not only for the Patriarchate of Constantinople, but for all of Orthodoxy, Metropolitan Hilarion says.

—Let's go back to history a bit. Next year, the 200th anniversary of the Greek uprising against the Ottomans for their freedom will be celebrated. Russia played a very important role in this uprising. What is Greece for Church people in Russia? What is the Greek Church and Greece? Despite all the problems, maybe something important enough remains that we are united?

*** Metropolitan Hilarion first speaks about what Greece means to him personally. ***

—If we're talking about relations between our Churches and our people in general, I would like to express the hope that the Greek people will not forget the feat of the Russian soldiers who took part in the liberation of Greece from the Ottoman yoke, spilling their blood on the Greek land. I really hope that, despite the division that has arisen, we will be able to maintain our ties at the cultural, spiritual, and ecclesiastical levels. Yes, we had to break off relations with several hierarchs of the Greek Church now (hopefully temporarily), including its primate, but we maintain unity with many other hierarchs.

I hope we will celebrate all such significant dates together. Our Churches have gone through a very difficult history. The Russian Orthodox Church is a martyric Church. For seventy years, it suffered from the godless authorities. Practically all of our bishops and clergy were physically exterminated in the 1930s. Literally only a few remained alive. Many of our churches were blown up, closed, destroyed, and wiped off the face of the Earth. We have come through all of this, and for more than thirty years now there has been an unprecedented revival of Church life in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and in other countries of the Russian Orthodox Church's canonical responsibility.

We very much hope that the sad events that have taken place in the Orthodox world will not destroy the centuries-old ties that exist between our faithful and between our peoples.

—Thank you, Vladyka, for this informative interview.

—Thank you, Athanasios.

Translation by Jesse Dominick

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