Interview of Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk to Romfea church news agency



Answering questions from a correspondent of Romfea, a Greek news agency, Metropolitan Hilarion, head of the Moscow Patriarchate's department for external church relations (DECR), dealt with pressing problems of inter-Orthodox relations and the issue concerning the schism in Ukraine.

- Your Eminence, how could you characterize the past year? Certainly, hardly any event would overshadow the coronavirus pandemic. Were any restrictions imposed by the state on the liturgical life of parishes? We have heard about some special measures taken by the Russian Orthodox Church up to disinfection during communion. What do you think about vaccination?

- Indeed, the past year was marked with the emergence of an illness the struggle with which has made a tremendous impact on every aspect of our life. We are fervently praying for the health of our families and loved ones. We are praying for all the humanity with the hope that the pandemic will soon be over. Due to the trial that befell us in 2020, there were many occasions for us to show our love of our neighbors, to help those who found themselves in isolation and disease. We remember the heroic work of medical doctors, the service rendered by priests, who came to hospitals and visited the elderly at their homes to give them communion, and the assistance of volunteers.

When tough quarantine measures were introduced in spring, we even had to close churches. Thus, we worshipped with closed church doors on the Passion Week and on the Easter day, with many parishes streaming the divine services for parishioners to take part in them through remote connection.

With a blessing of the Patriarch and the Holy Synod, strict sanitary measures were taken, which are still observed in churches at the present time. Parishioners stand during divine services in masks and observe social distance as far as possible as is prescribed by sanitary norms. We certainly believe that the infection cannot be transferred through the Holy Gifts themselves - the Body and Blood of Christ, which are the healing source for all the faithful. However, in the epidemic situation, we disinfect the spoon and do not offer the cup for kissing after Communion.

In taking these measures, there is no violation of the convention or the church Tradition. Indeed, today's practice is based on the experience of past centuries in which epidemics happened too. For instance, St. Nicodemus the Athonite writes about it in his commentary on Canon 28 of the Sixth Ecumenical Council, pointing how Communion should be given during an epidemic of plague.

As far as the vaccine is concerned, Russian scientists were among the first ones to develop it. From the example of those who have already been vaccinated we can already see that it is really effective and we now can really defeat this horrible virus.

- The Ukrainian church problem remains pressing as we regularly hear your various comments and statements. In Greece, an opinion is quite popular that if the Russian Orthodox Church had taken part in the Council of Crete and adopted the text on the autocephaly, then the present division in Orthodoxy could have been avoided. Recently this idea was expressed by Metropolitan Gabriel of Nea Ionia in his interview to Kathimerini Edition. What is your opinion?

- The theme of autocephaly has been discussed on many occasions during the pre-Council process, namely, at the meetings of the Inter-Orthodox Preparing Commission in 1993, 2009 and 2011. The text of the document 'Autocephaly and the Way of Declaring It' was almost completely agreed upon. All the

Churches in the persons of their representatives agreed that the granting of autocephaly in the future would be possible only with the consent of all the Local Churches, not by a unilateral decision of the Ecumenical Patriarch. It remained only to agree upon the form in which the signatures would stand under the tomos of autocephaly - an agreement on this issue was not reached. And what happened next? Patriarch Bartholomew, in April 2011, sent out letters to the Local Orthodox Churches proposing to remove the issue of autocephaly from the agenda and to hold a Pan-Orthodox Council. The Russian Church agreed with this proposal and it was a great mistake.

As you know, at the Synaxis of the Primates in 2016 in Chambesy, Patriarch Bartholomew, for all delegations of the Local Churches to hear, said, 'We recognize Metropolitan Onufry and greet him and as the only canonical hierarch of our Orthodox Church in Ukraine together with the holy hierarchs subordinate to him'. Patriarch Bartholomew promised not to interfere in the church affairs in Ukraine either before the Council or after it. We believed these words. We thought if the Ecumenical Patriarch says so, let us indeed hold a Council as he promises us and after it we will continue discussing the autocephaly topic. We should not have believed him; he deceived us. Precisely this was our great mistake.

As for the absence of the Russian Orthodox Church from the Council of Crete, you are well aware of the developments. The document 'Organization and Working Procedure of the Holy and Great Council' approved by the Local Orthodox Churches presupposed the convocation of a Council with the consent of the Primates of all the autocephalous Churches**[i]**. That is to say the Council was to be held with the participation of all the commonly recognized Local Orthodox Churches.

When three Local Churches, namely those of Bulgaria, Georgia and Antioch, refused to attend the Council, Patriarch Kirill wrote a letter to Patriarch Bartholomew proposing to hold an urgent Pre-Council Conference, to make decisions on the existing issues and still to invite these Churches to the Council. However, he received the following reply from Patriarch Bartholomew: 'A new extraordinary Pan-Orthodox Pre-Council Conference proposed by your Holy Church is deemed to be impossible since a normative basis for its convocation is absent'. Who exactly deemed it impossible? There were still two weeks remaining before the Council. Why measures could not still be taken for all to participate in the Council?

The legitimacy and obligatory nature of the decisions made by the Pan-Orthodox Council depended on the participation in it of the whole Orthodoxy. Therefore, if the delegation of the Russian Orthodox Church had taken part in the Council of Crete, it would have to state that the Council was not legitimate because three Churches were absent from it. It means that the Council would be frustrated.

Now we are told now: if you had come to the Council of Crete, we would have come to an agreement on

Ukraine and none of the events that followed would have happened. I heard it from many Greek hierarchs I met with. But if we recall that the Ukrainian topic was not on the Council agenda, it comes out that the only motive for Patriarch Bartholomew's action was actually revenge. That is to say, was it out of the feeling of revenge that he decided to grant 'autocephaly' to schismatics and 'to legalize' anathematized Philaret Denisenko?

The same strange thought was repeated by Metropolitan Gabriel of Nea Ionia. And now Bishop Cyril of Avida, in his recent article 'Ukrainian Autocephaly' honestly stated that even the ratification of the document on autocephaly by the Council of Crete would have changed nothing; for, as it follows from his reasoning, Constantinople still would not see in this document any obstacle for the actions it committed in Ukraine in the last two years.

- In his article that you have mentioned, professor at the University of Athens and hierarch of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, Bishop Cyril of Avida, cites the line of apostolic succession in the episcopal consecration of Macarius Maletich. It is for the first time that we see such a description of the sequence of Macarius' episcopal consecrations compiled by such a dignified author. In your opinion, how far is it a well-grounded version?

- Macarius Maletich, former head of one of the branches of the Ukrainian schism, has succession from the so-called Chekalin 'ordination' administered by layman Victor Chekalin and former bishop Ioann Bodharchuk in 1990 in the Lvov Region. It was stated on many occasions provided with documents and evidences. But His Grace of Avida in his defense of Chekalin's 'episcopal consecrations' offers as many as three versions at the same time with one contradicting another.

First, he alleges that the three schismatic 'hierarchs' who ordained Macarius Maletich, namely, Dmitry Yarema, Igor Isichenko and Mefody Kudryakov received their episcopal consecrations from Mstislav Skrypnik. It is not true. All the three of them were 'consecrated' already after the death of Mstislav Skrypnik who died on June 11, 1993, in Canada. None of them has succession from either Skrypnik or those who were installed by Skrypnik. Out of the three persons who 'consecrated' Macarius Maletich only Mefody Kudryakov had a conditional 'succession' from Philaret. The other two, Yarema and Isichenko, received their 'consecrations' from the Chekalin 'hierarchy'.

Then His Grace of Avida assumes that Macarius Maletich still has succession from the Chekalin 'consecrations'. However, he alleges that participating in this episcopal consecration was one more canonical bishop, namely, Archbishop Varlaam Ilyushchenko of Dnepropetrovsk and Zaporozhe, earlier of Simferopol and Crimea. And he refers to an undoubtedly falsified paper presented once by Bodnarchuk. It is a very lame version and it was clearly refuted by historian Sergey Shumilo. His article "Self-made 'Bishop' Vikentiy Chekalin and His Participation in the First Episcopal Consecrations of the

UAOC in 1990" was published on the Romfea website. Moreover, the author sent the text of the article to Patriarch Bartholomew himself. So far there has been no response to it.

Most probably, His Grace of Avida has not read S. Shumilo's article. I will remind you that cited in it are documented evidences of Bodnarchuk himself attested by his signature. In these documents, first, Bodnarchuk admits as invalid the 'consecrations' he administered in 1990. Secondly, he confesses that he forged Varlaam's signature in this document with his own hands soon after the latter died and could not disprove the forgery. The historian cites contemporary documented evidence of living eyewitnesses, His Eminence Varlaam's closest people - his Protodeacon and his driver. They also stated that since in the indicated dates Varlaam was in Crimea and could not be on a visit to Lvov.

I think His Grace of Avida is well aware that it is impossible to prove the apostolic succession of Chekalin's 'hierarchs'. Therefore, he puts forward a third line of argumentation - an ecclesiological one, and it looks even worse. He alleges that the issue of apostolic succession in accepting people from a schism does not matter. At the same time, he is very partial in his interpretation of some historical examples. For instance, he alleges that the Melitians were accepted by the First Ecumenical Council without ordination while the Council's Letter expressly states that they 'were confirmed in a more mysterious ordination' (μυστικωτέρᾳ χειροτονίᾳ βεβαιωθέντας).

These arguments can be traced back to an old brochure by Metropolitan Baselios of Anchialos. A comprehensive and detailed response to them has already been given by the Synodal Biblical-Theological Commission of the Russian Church. As a matter of fact, we are supposed to believe that any layman who has been in a schism and even has no apostolic succession can be accepted in the rank of 'bishop' by a stroke of the pen alone. At the same time, the Archbishop of Avida asserts with a reference to the some material from Lives of Saints of doubtful theological value that the Eucharist can be celebrated by a layman.

Regrettably, the Patriarchate of Constantinople did not show the necessary interest in the problem of the episcopal consecrations administered in the Ukrainian schism. Neither any study of archives documents nor any canonical examination has been made while attempts are still made to replace them with legends and forgeries or just an empty rhetoric.

- Staying within this topic, Your Eminence, I would like to ask this question. You condemn Fanar for admitting schismatic hierarchs and clergy in Ukraine to church communion without repentance or re-ordination. Didn't the Moscow Patriarchate do the same in case of the ROCOR?

- Even in the period of the existence of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR) in

isolation from the Moscow Patriarchate, her hierarchs were not deprived of their rank as was the case of Ioann Bodnarchuk or Filaret Denisenko and did not lose their apostolic succession. It is easy to trace this succession in all the cases and I do not know of a case that would be questionable.

Characteristically, as far back as 1989, before the creation of a pseudo-hierarchy in Ukraine, the same Vikentiy Chekalin visited New York in attempts to join ROCOR in the guise of bishop. But the ROCOR Bishops' Synod refused to recognize not only his 'episcopal' but also his 'priestly' rank. After that the adventurer made an attempt to steal a corporal, a bishop's pectoral icon and liturgical vessels from the sanctuary of the ROCOR cathedral in New York but was ridden out on a rail. His Grace of Avida could also read about it in Shumilo's article, which he does not mention.

- The Archbishop of Cyprus, in his recent statements, accused the Russian Church of an invasion into the canonical territory of the Patriarchate of Georgia, i.e. Abkhazia and Ossetia. The Bishop of Avida mentioned the same. An impression is created that there is a weighty ground for these rebukes.

- The Russian Church has repeatedly stated, also by the decision of the Holy Synod, that she recognizes the region you have mentioned as a canonical territory of the Church of Georgia. We also unconditionally recognize the old autocephaly of the Church of Georgia, which she received from the Patriarchate of Antioch, not from Constantinople, as proponents of Fanar have begun talking about in the recent times.

- In connection with the reference to the Bishop of Avida's article, I would like to ask whether you have met him personally. As far as I know, this hierarch used to come to Russia for several years. What were the reasons for his visits?

- I happened to meet with Bishop Cyril more than once. He frequently came to Russia because of his desire to study the Russian language. We gave him all possible assistance. In particular, we helped him obtain the Russia visa, though our clergy already had difficulties with obtaining Greek visas. In Russia there were quite a number of scandalous cases when Orthodox hierarchs and clergy with their families were denied Greek visas. Usually in such cases we asked not to create any obstacles for the Greek clergy to enter Russia.

I think, despite all the dire consequences endured by the Orthodox world as a result of the Patriarch of Constantinople's aggression, we should not surrender and withdraw into ourselves; we should seek to continue contacts and communication. The more so that in 2021 we will mark the 200th anniversary of the liberation of Greece which was not possible without Russia's participation and support. That is why the governments of our two countries have jointly proclaimed this year as a Year of the History of Russia

and Greece.

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[i] Article 1 - By the grace of the Holy Trinity, the Holy and Great Council is an authentic expression of the canonical tradition and diachronic ecclesiastical practice—through the work of the synodal system—in One Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, and is convened by His All-Holiness, the Ecumenical Patriarch, with the consent of Their Beatitudes, the Primates of **all** the universally recognized autocephalous Local Orthodox Churches; and it shall be comprised of members appointed to each Church delegation.

Article 8 - The work of the Council shall begin and conclude with the celebration of the pan-Orthodox Divine Liturgy, presided over by the Ecumenical Patriarch, with the participation of **all** the Primates of autocephalous Orthodox Churches or their representatives, in accordance with the holy Diptychs of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

Article 13.1 - **All** Primates of the autocephalous Orthodox Churches shall initial every page of each text; they shall initial every page of each official translation. The Chairman and all the members of the Council shall sign the final page of each text.

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