Metropolitan Hilarion: Restoration of unity in our common Orthodox family is possible only through the denial of false ecclesiology



Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations, answered questions of Branko Vlahović, a correspondent of Večernje novosti, a Serbian daily newspaper.

– Last year the Serbian Orthodox Church has suffered a painful loss. Patriarch Irinej and Metropolitan Amfilohije, who had been held in respect by all people and enjoyed their love, passed away. You met with both of them many times. Which meetings will you remember forever?

– The Lord has blessed me with an opportunity to talk and pray with His Holiness Patriarch Irinej of Serbia many times. I was impressed by his earnest integrity, inner concentration, deep and strong moves of his soul, and, most of all, by his ability to share compassion and joy. I remember him speaking with courage and resolve in support of the suffering Orthodoxy in Ukraine. He loved members of his flock and shared his life with them. When he gave his blessing to the faithful or administered Holy

Communion to them, especially to children, his face was shining with joy.

I happened to now Metropolitan Amfilohije personally. He was an outstanding archpastor gifted at many different skills and abilities: theologian, organizer and spiritual adviser. His time at the Montenegro and the Littoral diocese had been an epoch of revival of the Church there. Metropolitan Amfilohije has brought a lot of people to the Church, inspired thousands of the faithful to selfless labour for the sake of the spiritual revival of Montenegro and helped members of his flock to understand themselves as the One Body of Christ. Thanks to his archpastoral labors on the days of processions of the cross in defense of the holy sites the world could hear the Orthodox heart of Montenegro beating. The nationwide movement in defense of the holy sites initiated by Metropolitan Amfilohije has become a dramatic event in the whole Christian world and made many our contemporaries think about the faith of their forefathers.

– You have underscored at the Church and the World TV programme that the Russian Orthodox Church would remember the Patriarch of Serbia also for his support of the canonical Orthodoxy in Ukraine. What kind of events do you expect in Ukraine? Will the rift among the schismatics deepen?

– The creation of the so-called 'Orthodox Church of Ukraine' (OCU) has an artificial political nature. The former president of Ukraine has been preparing this project for his election campaign. In 2018 the false bishops of the two uncanonical denominations that earlier had conflicted with each other gathered together. Tremendous pressure had been put on the hierarchs of the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church, but only two out of ninety bishops had agreed to join the schismatics. There are one hundred and two bishops of the UOC at present.

The Patriarchate of Constantinople has recognized and legalized the newly created schismatic structure also under strong pressure fr om without. Metropolitan Emmanuel who represented Constantinople at the meeting of the schismatics tried to depart fr om Kiev on the eve of the council. According to recollections of the participants, the authorities brought him back forcefully having obstructed air flights. On the day of the council the “exarches” seeing almost no one from the canonical Church threatened with departure again, but there was no turning back. At least, people who attended this strange meeting are writing about it.

The so-called ‘autocephaly” was granted with certain restrictions. For instance, the OCU had to renounce all its communities outside of Ukraine and waive its right to set up new communities, thus aggravating contradictions within the OCU. Filaret Denisenko, the former leader of a schismatic group (and, incidentally, a great friend of Miraš Dedejć, a schismatic from Montenegro) refused to acknowledge Patriarch Bartholomew’s tomos and re-established his organization, the so-called Kiev

Patriarchate. There are twelve bishops in this structure, and their number keeps growing.

It appears from certain public presentations that contradictions within the OCU remaining part are mounting. There is no one to celebrate in churches seized by the OCU as the clergymen and laypeople of the canonical Church do not want to move to schism; churches are either empty, or closed.

There are wise words in the Bible: “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain” (Ps 127:1). The leadership of the Patriarchate of Constantinople has declared that the autocephaly would allegedly unite the Orthodox in Ukraine, but schism has only exacerbated, while the stability of the situation in the Ukrainian Orthodox Church is obvious. Despite mass seize of its churches in 2018-2019 and the discriminative bills it remains the largest confession in Ukraine with the largest number of communities all over the country.

– Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia said in his condolences over the demise of Metropolitan Amfilohije that the rebirth of Montenegro was associated with his name. Metropolitan Amfilohije had been a most authoritative hierarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church who had led the movement against the discriminative law on freedom of religion or belief in Montenegro. What do you think of the future of Orthodoxy in Montenegro? The Orthodox have shown their selfless willingness to defend their Church. Will it be so in the future?

– Orthodoxy in Montenegro has been built on the solid foundation layed by Ss Basil of Ostrog and Peter of Cetinje. The Orthodox faith has given strength to our brethren to stand up in the struggle for freedom, creating their national character and authentic culture and promoting appearance and development of their statehood. The nationwide movement for defense of the holy sites has obviously shown to the whole world the utmost importance of the faith of the forefathers and of the Orthodox Church to the residents of the country and especially to those to whom its future belongs – the youth. I believe it very important that through the labors of Metropolitan Amfilohije of the blessed memory the younger generation of Montenegro has been introduced to the spiritual heritage of their fathers and imbued by the responsibility for its preservation for posterity. The great Orthodox spiritual tradition for which the martyrs shed their blood so many times is God’s blessing for Montenegro.

– After the Synod of the Orthodox Church of Cyprus had voiced support for the recognition of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), you said at Rossia-24 TV channel that it would have been good to set up a world religious forum like the UN to unite representatives of different confessions. Could you please explain?

– I would like to make it clear that at the Church and the World programme to which you refer I did not

offer an idea of founding an international discussion platform for the religious organizations from all countries on the world on the model of the United Nations Organizations, but made comments on an idea offered by a TV viewer. My comments were in no way connected with the relations in the Orthodox world. While answering this question, I stated that there was no world organization at present with a space for dialogue among different religions. At the same time I pointed out the complexities on the way to the implementation of this idea. There are over two hundred UN member states, but millions of religious organizations and communities in the world. Not all of them are centrally managed, as, for instance, the Russian Orthodox Church. Also, their representation in such a world organization is not quite clear. Anyway, it is quite obvious that in the present situation fraught with different conflicts and social upheavals, a dialogue among religious communities in different format is an imperative of modern times.

– While the Russian Orthodox Church is denouncing Patriarch Bartholomew for schism, he promised to visit Ukraine next August when Independence Day will be celebrated. He broke the news in Istanbul on November 30 after the festive divine service attended by the Ukrainian Prime Minister Denis Shmyhal. Please, give your comment on the situation.

– I believe it is not for me to comment on the situation, but for the Ukrainians who have become victims of the seizures, including priests who have been beaten and thrown out of churches which they had built with their own hands. Those who have caused them pain think that they have got moral right to do it in the name of Patriarch Bartholomew. In the acts of seizing they boldly allude to him and the Tomos he has signed. There is every reason to believe that his visit to Ukraine would be used for new seizures. However, I doubt that this visit could change the situation one way or another. The believers will continue to pray in canonical churches, while the schismatic churches will stand empty, and politicians will be trying to use the religious factor to their advantage as before.

– Patriarch Bartholomew has often demonstrated his wish to be the Pope of the East. Can his 'papism' bring about the break of Orthodoxy into two parts oriented to the two poles – Constantinople and Moscow?

– Indeed, Patriarch Bartholomew has behaved recently not as a coordinator of the inter-Orthodox relations as he had once called himself, but as the head of the Church of Christ and a sole master whom nobody can judge. Such claims to power are alien to the Orthodox teaching. The most difficult consequences for the world Orthodoxy brought about by the uncanonical actions of Constantinople are quite obvious to all. If Patriarch Bartholomew would continue such actions, the schism in Orthodoxy would be aggravated. However, the dividing line does not run between Constantinople and Moscow or between the Greeks and the Slavs. It divides hierarchs, clergymen and laypeople into those faithful to the holy canons and the Patristic Tradition and those who trample upon them.

I do hope that no final schism would happen in Orthodoxy, and the unity in our common family would be restored. Yet, the restoration of unity is possible only through the denial of false ecclesiology and the return to the strict observance of church canons.

– What is your estimation of the present contacts of the Russian Orthodox Church with the Holy See? The first meeting of the Patriarch of Moscow and the Pope took place in Havana in 2016. What must be done to go on?

– The meeting of Pope Francis and His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia in Havana was conditioned by the necessity of coordinating efforts in defense of Christians in the Middle East and involved meticulous work done over many years.

Due to the difficulties which the development of the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue was facing, the sides acknowledged the importance of common work in the social, cultural and charity spheres without tying it up with progress in achieving consensus on the purely theological issues.

In compliance with the agreements reached in Havana the implementation of some joint humanitarian projects in the Middle East began after the meeting. Since that time cooperation in cultural sphere has been largely increased as well.

Notwithstanding existing differences, many joint projects are being successfully realized. While fulfilling our common Christian vocation in present-day conditions, we preserve our identity.

– One can read in certain mass media that Patriarch Kirill, 'many bishops, clergymen and laypeople' are not ready to welcome Pope Frances in their 'canonical territory.' Criticism has recently been voiced in the Russian Orthodox Church for his support for same-sex civil unions. Is that so?

– A visit of Pope Francis to Russia is not an issue on the agenda of bilateral relations. It should be noted that Pope Frances and his predecessors have already visited some countries in the canonical responsibility of the Russian Orthodox Church. Every time the visit was prepared with these countries'

specific conditions taken into consideration. It is important to bear in mind that high priority should be given to maintaining the fragile and sometimes delicate inter-confessional balance.

– President Stevo Pendarovski of North Macedonia asked Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople to use his right and recognize the canonically unrecognized Macedonian Orthodox Church established in 1967. However, neither the Serbian Orthodox Church nor other Local Orthodox Churches have recognized it as autocephalous. What must be done to avoid new conflicts?

– The Russian Orthodox Church has always considered the solution of the Macedonian church issue a sole prerogative of the Serbian Orthodox Church, and any attempt of interference without its consent as inadmissible.

– The names of the saints on frescoes in some churches in North Macedonia have been changed recently. The Serbs living in Macedonia have complained to the authorities about it. How would you comment on these acts of vandalism?

– I am convinced that the perpetrators are not people of the church. The inscription is the most important component of iconography. No icon would be blessed without the name of a saint. Apart from the spiritual aspect, in my opinion, these acts are an attempt to distort history.

– The Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church has sent many appeals to the UN and UNESCO asking them to defend the Serbian churches from the Albanian nationalists. The Albanians have changed their tactics and decided to convince the world community that they had built these churches themselves. Which advise could you give to the Serbs?

– During my visits to Kosovo and Metohija I saw with my own eyes the ruins of churches blown up by extremists and the holy sites turned into dumps and cesspits. The hate for the holy places was strongly felt. The evil deeds of bandits who had blown up and defiled churches and monasteries in Kosovo and Metohija have demonstrated to the whole world that they had no historical or spiritual ties with these holy places. If only they had these ties, their behavior would have been different. For instance, the Orthodox Greeks have cherished in their hearts and are cherishing St. Sophia’s Cathedral even turned into a mosque. We pray for our Serbian brothers living in the most difficult conditions in the sacred land. May the Lord give them strength and patience for preserving the heritage of their fathers!

– Over the last two months, the number of the coronavirus victims in the Russian Orthodox Church has increased considerably. Vladimir Zhirinovsky, leader of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, has said that all churches should be closed for the duration of the pandemic

since, in his opinion, necessary safety precautions in the churches are not being observed. The Moscow Patriarchate was critical of this statement. The supreme authorities believe that the current safety measures suffice. According to the Russian Orthodox Church's official representatives, the Church has taken "unprecedented safety measures" in strict compliance with the promptly established rules. What were the document's recommendations to all dioceses? What can you recommend to the Serbian brothers?

– Given that people continue to go to the cinemas and theatres, do shopping at supermarkets and use public transport wh ere at rush hours it is simply impossible to observe social distancing, the demand to close churches under the pretext of the ongoing epidemic is strange, to say the least. Besides, I suppose that those who find it possible to speak about "non-compliance" with sanitary measures in Orthodox churches should attend the divine services in person and make conclusions based on their own observations. For example, at the Moscow Church of the 'Joy of All Who Sorrow' Icon of the Mother of God in Ordynka, wh ere I serve as rector, parishioners wear masks during the services and keep social distance, the spoon used for distributing the Holy Gifts is dipped into disinfectant solution and then into hot water after every partaker, and zapivka (post-Communion wine diluted with warm water) is poured into disposable cups.

It is being done in accordance with the instructions and recommendations that received approval of the Holy Synod. Last spring there were drawn up the Instructions to Rectors of Parishes and Metochions, Abbots and Abbesses. The rules to be observed at a time of epidemic in all our dioceses in the territory of the Russian Federation were also set forth in the circular letter sent out by the chancellor of the Moscow Patriarchate last October.

Apart from the measures which I mentioned earlier these documents also stipulate that there should be containers with disinfectant solutions in churches, ventilation schedule and clean-up should be arranged, and disinfection of icons and other church decoration items during the day should be ensured. Changes have also affected customary norms of church etiquette, for instance, for the period of epidemic a priest should refrain from offering his hand for kissing. Besides, special recommendations were prepared for administering baptisms, confessions, weddings and funerals, and regulating the work of Sunday schools.

As for your last question, I have to say that each Orthodox Church works out and adopts its own complex of sanitary measures depending on the epidemiological situation in the country and other factors. Therefore, I do not think it necessary to give advice to the Orthodox Serbs on this matter.

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