Metropolitan Hilarion: Constantinople's papist claims are groundless



Recently, the Patriarchate of Constantinople has become even more insistent that other Local Churches must recognise its absolute primacy and authority in the Orthodox world. The Greek mass media regularly publish articles and interviews on this topic, which are often blatantly tendentious. In his interview to RIA Novosti news agency, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations, made it clear if there are any grounds for Constantinople's claims.

Vladyka, in his recent interview to Ethnicos Kirikas Greek newspaper, Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople said that we, Orthodox Christians, ought to self-critically revise our ecclesiology if we do not want to become a federation of Protestant-type churches. According to him, in Orthodoxy there is *primus* not only in honour, but *primus* with special responsibility and canonical powers. Where do these claims come from and what should we make of them?

To begin with, I will explain what "ecclesiology" is. Translated from the Greek, this word means

"teaching on the Church." Therefore, what is being suggested is that we should revise our teaching on the Church. Taking what as a model? Sure thing, Roman Catholicism. In the Roman Church there is the pope – "*primus* not only in honour, but *primus* with special responsibility and canonical powers." Until now, such thing has not existed in the Orthodox Church: there has only been the first in honour.

For centuries Orthodox polemicists, including Patriarchs of Constantinople and other Eastern Patriarchs, were speaking out against the papism. Yet, now it is being suggested that we should reshape the Orthodox ecclesiology, coping the papist model.

They tell us: if there is no *primus* with special powers, we risk to turn into a "federation of Protestant-type churches." That is, there is either the Roman Catholic or the Protestant model – *tertium non datur*. Then what has been the principle of our Orthodox Church's organisation until now, the Protestant one?

I will not dwell on the issue of how the institute of papacy originated and developed in the West. This is a separate wide topic. I will only draw your attention to the obvious fact – the Orthodox East never knew such phenomenon. The Orthodox Church always functioned as the family of the Local Churches without any earthly head. On the universal scale, Jesus Christ was always honoured as the Head of the Church, and at the local level, Primates were heads of the Churches and considered as equal and independent. None of them was subordinate to the other or spread his jurisdiction over the other Churches.

There was a certain order among the Primates. It was established at the Second Ecumenical Council which resolved to regard the Bishop of Rome as the first one; then followed the Bishop of Constantinople, then of Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem. In the Orthodox East, this was called "Pentarchy." It was exclusively in honour that the first was higher than the second, and the second higher than the third. However, the senior had no authority over the junior, and the first had no authority over the rest.

The 11th century saw the schism between the East and the West. One of its causes were claims of the Popes of Rome for the universal headship. The Eastern Patriarchs, first the Patriarch of Constantinople, then the others, did not agree with that. They severed communion with the Pope, and the bishop who was the second, became, in fact, the first in the family of the Eastern Churches. However, it did not imply any prerogatives, privileges, or "special responsibility" towards the other Primates.

And now, all of a sudden, we are being told that such person is needed, that without him the Orthodox Church will not survive. Two thousand years have passed, and now we will not be able to live as we used to, we have to urgently "revise the ecclesiology," and place one at the head of many.

We are Orthodox Christians. It means that to us the Head of the Church is Christ, not the Bishop of

Constantinople or of any other Local Church. St. Germanus the Patriarch of Constantinople wrote in the 13th century: "The Head of the Church is Christ, and any coveting after headship is against His teaching." In their historical polemic with the papism, the Church Fathers, using the example of the ancient See of Rome, drew clear dividing lines of the Orthodox understanding of primacy. According to them, it "is not that of a lordship, nor even appellate… but is a brotherly privilege in the Catholic Church, and an honour assigned the Popes on account of the greatness and privilege of the City" (Encyclical of the Eastern Patriarchs, 1848).

Did these claims arise all of a sudden, or were they ripening gradually?

The papist model is being gradually implanted in the Orthodox ecclesiology. It was being done, in particular, through the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue, in which we participated earlier, but not anymore. Through it, they tried to adopt a document that would provide a theological basis for the papist model of the Church's structure.

The arguments were as follows: in the Holy Trinity there is the primacy of God the Father and conciliarity of the Son and the Holy Spirit. So, in the Church as well the model of primacy and conciliarity should be functioning at all levels. At the diocesan level, the bishop performs the role of *primus* and priests ensure conciliarity; at the level of a Local Church, her Primate is *primus* and conciliarity is exercised by hierarchs; and, therefore, at the level of the Universal Church, there also should be *primus*, to whom the rest are sort of subordinate.

The author of this idea is Metropolitan John (Zizioulas). Through the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue he tried to impose this idea on all the Local Orthodox Churches. However, he met with determined resistance, especially of the Russian Orthodox Church. Neither in the Holy Tradition, nor in the writings of the Holy Fathers, nor in the church canons we found nothing that could confirm such theory.

After the Council of Crete Constantinople claimed that it also had other special powers and privileges. Now they are trying to prove that the Patriarch of Constantinople is the supreme arbiter in all disputes and conflict situations in the Local Churches, regardless of the position of these very Churches. For example, a cleric of the Russian Church, defrocked for certain offences, can appeal to Constantinople and be restored to his rank.

This is exactly what happened to the former Metropolitan of Kiev, Filaret (Denisenko). He was defrocked as bishop and monk and later even excommunicated. Yet, Patriarch Bartholomew, who back then had recognised his excommunication, decided to restore him to his "rank." What rank? Filaret calls himself "patriarch of Kiev." Who does the Church of Constantinople reckon him to be now? He was restored to his "rank" not upon the request of the Russian Church, from which he had been cast out, and

not upon the request of her self-governing part, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, but upon the request of schismatics and the Ukrainian secular authorities. It is, indeed, a brand new, unheard-of ecclesiology.

At the same time, the Patriarch of Constantinople says that Ukraine turns out to be his canonical territory. Why has he not made this claim earlier? Why is it that in all the calendars of the Church of Constantinople of the year 2018 and earlier the Ukrainian Church was reckoned as a part of the Moscow Patriarchate, and not a word was said about its dependency of any kind from Constantinople? For three hundred years they were silent, and then suddenly remembered.

Now Patriarch Bartholomew asserts that he only tolerates the existence of Metropolitan Onufry and the Church, which he heads, in Ukraine out of "condescension." This is an absolute absurd and insane situation. Who is he to decide? The Church has self-governing status, over a hundred hierarchs, twelve and a half thousand parishes, and more than two hundred and fifty monasteries, including the largest Lavras, of Kiev Caves, Pochaev, and Svyatogorsk. And this is the Church which, if you can believe it, he tolerates out of condescension!

And we are being told to seek some "compromises," some "resolution to the Ukrainian issue." Patriarch Bartholomew has already "resolved" the Ukrainian issue. What did he receive as the result? Before, he was first among equals in the family of Primates of the Local Orthodox Churches. With the consent of these Churches, he even had certain coordinating functions. Yet, now he coordinates nothing. He is not in the diptychs of the Russian Orthodox Church. To tens of millions of Orthodox Christians in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and other countries of the Russian Church's canonical responsibility he has become *persona non grata*. And the schism that originated in Ukraine now goes through the whole of the world Orthodoxy.

What is more, this schism now exists within some of the Local Churches. Here is a recent example. At the instigation of the Patriarch of Constantinople, the Archbishop of Cyprus commemorated schismatic Yepifany during the Liturgy. The Synod of the Church of Cyprus divided, with several hierarchs speaking strongly against it. At last, the decision was taken that the Synod would not "oppose" the Archbishop's decision.

Apparently, such is the new ecclesiology proposed to us: one person decides everything and others do not oppose him. The only thing is that the Russian Orthodox Church and such ecclesiology have different paths to follow. We cannot and will not give up our faith and the Holy Tradition, including our Orthodox ecclesiology. We remember St. Paul's words: "Even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed" (Gal 1:8).

As far back as 2008, the Bishops' Council of our Church warned the Patriarch of Constantinople: stop

altering our Orthodox teaching on the Church and on the authority within her, no good will come of it. Regrettably, he took no heed then; nor does he heed now.

So what? As the Lord says, "you will know them by their fruits" (Mt 7:16). What fruits the arbitrariness of the Patriarch of Constantinople have yielded, we already see.

Patriarch Bartholomew asserts that the Ecumenical Councils have endowed the Primates of Constantinople with special powers. Is that so?

The famous Canon 28 of the Council of Chalcedon decrees: "For the fathers rightly acknowledged the prerogatives of the throne of the Elder Rome because it was the Imperial City, and moved by the same consideration the 150 bishops beloved of God awarded the same prerogatives to the most holy throne of the New Rome, rightly judging that the city which is honored by the imperial authority and the senate and enjoys the same [civil] prerogatives as the imperial city of the Elder Rome, should also be magnified in ecclesiastical matters as she is, being second after her. Consequently, the metropolitans – and they alone - of the dioceses of Pontus, Asia and Thrace, as well as the bishops of the aforementioned dioceses who are among the barbarians, shall be ordained by the aforementioned most holy throne of the most holy Church of Constantinople."

This is an explicit provision. The canonical jurisdiction of the Patriarch of Constantinople is clearly defined: it includes three dioceses (provinces) of the Roman Empire, which territory roughly matches the present-day territory of Turkey. It is also said that the Patriarch of Constantinople must ordain not only metropolitans for these dioceses, but also bishops for the barbarians (that is, not Greeks) living in these provinces.

A theory has been made out of this canon according to which the Patriarch of Constantinople must have jurisdiction over all ‘barbarian’ lands, including Western Europe, North and South America, Australia, East and Southeast Asia. And now Constantinople in all seriousness calls on this canon for establishing its claims on the universal jurisdiction and demands that parishes of all Local Churches in these regions be turned over to him. But this claim is arbitrary and has no ground in the canon to which he refers.

Canon 9 of the same Council of Chalcedon reads: "If a bishop or clergyman should have a difference with the metropolitan of the province, let him have recourse to the Exarch of the Diocese, or to the throne of the Imperial City of Constantinople, and there let it be tried."

On the ground of this canon Constantinople asserts its right to receive appeals from any Local Church. But this is not so. This canon is valid for the Church of Constantinople only. In the modern times (the 19th

century) the authoritative interpreters of canons, for instance, St. Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain, refuted the deceitful opinion about the right of the Patriarch of Constantinople ‘to act in the dioceses and provinces of other Patriarchs’ and consider appeals from these provinces.

Does it mean that the primacy in the Orthodox Church is not needed at all? What does the Russian Orthodox Church think about it?

The opinion of our Church on the primacy has been expressed by the Holy Synod in 2013 in the document "Position of the Moscow Patriarchate on the problem of Primacy in the Universal Church." The Russian Church has never denied the primacy of honour in the Church. But primacy in the Orthodox Church should always be balanced by conciliarity. This is a fundamental principle that can be found in Canon 34 of the Holy Apostles: "The **bishops** of every nation must acknowledge him who is first among them and account him as their head, and do nothing of consequence without his consent; but each may do those things only which concern his own parish, and the country places which belong to it. But neither let him (who is the first) do anything without the consent of all; for so there will be unanimity, and God will be **glorified** through the Lord in the **Holy Spirit**."

There is another point in the same canon ignored by the Patriarch of Constantinople: to do only that what concerns his jurisdiction. The canons of the Ecumenical Councils quite clearly define the canonical boundaries of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, which roughly match those of the present-day Turkey. Yet the Patriarch of Constantinople wishes to extend his power over other Churches, this being a direct contradiction to the Church canons.

Finally, it is important to pay attention to the words: "the bishops of every nation" which express the principle of locality. *Primus* functions at the local level, rather at the universal one. There is no church canon of the epoch of the Ecumenical Councils that establishes powers of *primus* at the universal level.

Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople deliberately and notably defied the fundamental principle of conciliarity. He has not sought advice of other Churches on the Ukrainian issue, but has committed his actions in clear defiance of their will. He has encroached upon the bounds of the Russian Church having declared them his own, entered into Eucharistic communion with schismatics, who have no canonical ordination, and thus has lost a coordinating role in Orthodoxy and forfeited his right to the primacy of honour in the Orthodox Church.

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