



Metropolitan Hilarion: A new wave of capturing churches is possible in Ukraine



A little more than a year ago, a meeting took place in ‘Amman format’ between Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia and representatives of Local Orthodox Churches on the church schism in Ukraine. The situation of Christian in Ukraine, new persecutions against and plans of Ukrainian authorities, as well as prospects for a meeting of the heads of Orthodox Churches are dealt with in an exclusive interview given to RIA Novosti by the head of the Department for External Church Relations (DECR) of the Moscow Patriarchate, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk.

- A year ago in Amman, heads and representatives of several Local Orthodox Churches were invited by Patriarch Theophilos of Jerusalem to discuss the situation that developed in the world Orthodoxy. This year, Patriarch Theophilos has called to continue meetings. Has something changed since that time?

- From our perspective, the situation in the world Orthodox family is critical today. The crisis in the world Orthodoxy has been caused by the invasion of the Patriarchate of Constantinople into Ukraine. The legalization of the Ukrainian schism and the status of autocephaly given to it has not united the Orthodox Christians in Ukraine as was promised by Fanar (the district of Istanbul where the residence of the Patriarch of Constantinople is located - ed.). On the contrary, the division, which existed in one country, now begins spreading to the entire Orthodox world.

Despite the enormous political pressure from external forces, most of the Local Churches refuse to recognize the Ukrainian schism. Even in the few Churches, whose Primate have recognized the schismatics, namely, the Churches of Greece, Alexandria and Cyprus, a considerable part of the hierarchy have not agreed with this decision, while those hierarchs who even recognized the new 'church' avoid concelebrating with the schismatics. The Russian Church, in her turn, as canons require, has had to break off relations with the Primate and hierarchs who have recognized the schism.

The situation is complicated by the Patriarch of Constantinople's claim to be the supreme arbiter in disputes between Local Churches. But he cannot act as such or chair a discussion on the Ukrainian church problem, as he is a side of the conflict that advocates its own interests. *Nemo iudex in causa sua* ('no one should be a judge in their own cause' - ed.) affirms an old principle of the Roman law.

- Does Patriarch Theophilos have the right to convene a conference of Primates?

- Patriarch Theophilos, in convening primates for a common meeting, acts as the voice of the synodality of the Church. The Orthodox Church seeks ways of restoring the mechanism of synodality that has been affected by the unilateral decision of one of the first hierarchs. The Church of Jerusalem is the mother of all Churches. She is the oldest since her inception; she has quite a special importance for all Christians throughout the world because of the great common Christian shrines she safeguards.

Some Greek authors expressed their displeasure with the idea of the meeting in Amman since it was not convened by the Patriarchate of Constantinople. But, first, in history and in the church canon law such meetings of Primates were not restricted at all. Secondly, there are precedents when Councils with participation of other Primates were convened by Patriarchs of Jerusalem, not Constantinople.

For instance, the Council of Jerusalem in 764, at which Patriarch Theodorus of Jerusalem together with the Patriarchs of Alexandria and Antioch condemned the iconoclastic heresy and confirmed the decisions of the six Ecumenical Councils. In 1443 in Jerusalem, Patriarch Joachim of Jerusalem chaired the famous Council that condemned the Ferrara-Florence Union with Rome. Participating in the Council were Patriarchs Dorotheus of Antioch and Phylophous of Alexandria. Moreover, the Council in effect considered an appellation of one of the Constantinopolitan hierarchs, Metropolitan Arsenios of Ceasarea

in Cappadocia, against his Patriarch who had diverted to unia.

In 1522 in Jerusalem, Patriarch Dorotheus II together with the Patriarchs of Alexandria and Antioch, conciliarly deposed Metropolitan Joannicius of Sozopol, who had captured the See of Constantinople, and restored Patriarch Jeremiah to it. The Council was convened by the Patriarch of Jerusalem and was chaired by him, although the lawful Patriarch Jeremiah of Constantinople was present at the Council.

Finally, in 1672, Patriarch Dositheos II of Jerusalem convened in Jerusalem a Council with the participation of representatives of other Local Churches, which published 'The Orthodox Confession of the Faith'. At the same time, the Council condemned a confession of the faith written along Protestant lines that circulated under the name of Patriarch Cyril Loukaris of Constantinople.

- You say that Constantinople has failed to unite Orthodoxy in Ukraine. What is the present situation there?

- There was a wave of captures of churches in the period from 2014 to 2019, especially in the early 2019 when 'autocephaly' (independence - ed.) had already been granted and Petr Poroshenko, on the eve of the presidential elections, had to demonstrate to the constituency at all costs 'the unity' of Ukrainian Orthodoxy. As those elections showed, the stake on Constantinople did not pay for itself. The very idea of tomos (charter-ed.) of autocephaly as a symbol uniting the Ukrainian Orthodoxy petered out. However, the granting of tomos by Constantinople has provoked hundreds of conflicts throughout Ukraine. Some of them are smoldering sometimes to flare up again.

Captures were organized as 'voluntary moves' to the newly-created structure. Instead of the parish community those who voted for 'the move' were just local people of various confessions and sometimes even outliers. Documents were often forged. Property was re-registered with gross violations, and churches themselves were captured by force with the mass beating of elderly people and clergy. But an overwhelming majority of the Orthodox clergy and faithful have refused to move to the new 'church'. None of over two hundred monasteries has moved to the schism.

At the same time, the clergy and faithful of the canonical (Ukrainian Orthodox - ed.) Church have showed striking steadfastness. They would organize round-the-clock watching and everyday prayers at their church. And when their churches were still taken away from them, they continued praying at hastily adjusted facilities and sometimes outdoors.

Recently the whole Orthodox world saw the shots showing how the community of the Delovoye village in the Zakarpattia Region, deprived of their church, worships at the Divine Liturgy in the open air - in mountains, on snow, in a 10 degrees of frost. And there are many cases when people, who have been

deprived of their church, build a new one with their own hands while not losing their love for their stray brothers and trust in God. This is what the recent documentary 'The Faithful' tells us and I advise everybody to see it.

And what about the wives and families of the clergy and active parishioners who have had such a hard time? We cannot even imagine what they have had to go through. Under Poroshenko, in the Volyn Region, four supporters of the 'autocephalous church' beat up a teenager, a son of a priest, for his video recording the capture of his church. In the Chernovtsy Region, a schoolgirl was not let go to her school-leaving party because she was a choirgirl at the church of the canonical Church. Insults, threats to mothers and their small children, attempts to evict families from their home at nights by breaking windows and setting fires. No, according to the Apostle, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?" (Rom. 8:35). All who have endured such tortures are real confessors of the faith of Christ.

Now the captured churches stand empty and sometimes stand closed, as there is nobody to serve for, nobody to pray. But the communities, whose churches were taken away, have not disintegrated, have not moved to the schism - they are as alive as before. Recently a congress of representatives of such communities was held in Kiev. The people's mood is joyful and confident: they are ready to support each other, to defend their rights of believers in the legal space. They have adopted a video-message to the Ukrainian leadership. It is possible to capture a church by force, but it is impossible to win people's heart by force.

- Conflicts between communities continue to this day. Do you think the authority in force is responsible for it?

- I am not sure that the central authorities are always able to control the local situations dependent on nationalistic organizations and regional elites. The strong pressure on Ukraine from outside also has an effect.

After Poroshenko left in May 2019, captures of churches abruptly slowed down since they had been organized mostly by local authorities and special forces aligned with Kiev. But in some western regions where Poroshenko's party has preserved its influence, attempts at captures still continue and recently have become more frequent.

A special concern is caused by discriminatory laws introduced under Poroshenko. Under President Zelensky, their operation has been blocked but they are not cancelled in spite of many protests of the faithful. Still in force is the law prohibiting the Ukrainian Orthodox Church to call herself Ukrainian, while her members are Ukrainians by birth and passport, patriots of their country, not at all some Russians.

The new communities of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church are still denied registration. Hundreds of communities (and these are thousands of the faithful who have united in order to build churches for themselves) simply do not exist on paper and are prevented from building them. Moreover, registered are new bills that allow liquidating any religious organization in Ukraine on the basis of a variety of vague and not proved accusations. I wish to hope that the present authority will not repeat the mistakes of the previous one: it is impossible to build a positive political agenda on religious contradictions.

- This year Patriarch Bartholomew has stated his intention to visit Ukraine. Will this visit make it possible to mitigate the conflict?

- Ukrainian archpastors and clergy, many political scientists and experts have expressed an apprehension that the arrival of the Patriarch of Constantinople would only aggravate the conflicts. Radical political forces in Ukraine will have to show Fanar 'the united Orthodoxy' in Ukraine, and this may provoke a new wave of capturing churches. In recent months, the level of violence has begun to rise again. And if the discriminatory laws come into force, the degree of tension will instantly rise; conflicts among communities, attempts at captures and cases of violence will be estimated at hundreds.

Already now there are indicative cases as the one that happened lately in the Zadubrovka village in the Chernovtsy Region. Six young people who are supporters of the OCU (schismatic 'Orthodox Church of Ukraine' - ed.) cruelly beat up a 63 year-old parishioner of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, who was walking home from the church. The same young people are said to have taken part previously in the capture of a church and were not punished. But hardly will Patriarch Bartholomew like to come to Zadubrovka and visit the aggrieved old man in the hospital. He will be shown more beautiful pictures.

I think, for the same reason he has been invited not for the church celebration on July 28 - the Day of the Baptism of Russia, but for the state celebration in the end of August. On the Baptism of Russia day, the canonical Church traditionally holds a procession with the cross in Kiev, which unites hundreds of thousands of the faithful and visually shows that no fictitious public opinion poll can refute: the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church continues to be the largest confession in Ukraine.

- Is there a risk that the division in Orthodoxy will intensify and lead to a global schism?

- The Russian Church exerts every effort to prevent it from happening. We seek to explain our position to all the Local Churches, all the Orthodox Christians in the world. It is a schism and weakened Orthodoxy, the separation of the Russian Church from other fraternal Churches that is a matter of interest for these forces with their global, worldwide scale of influence. Today these forces try to use the

conflict in Ukraine, including the inter-confessional one, situationally as an instrument of the containment of Russia. But a potential danger of this conflict, especially in the religious sphere, is enormous: in case of its further escalation it will be impossible to control it. For the world Orthodoxy it is extremely important not to let them draw us in these geo-political intrigues.

*RIA Novosti/
DECR Communication Service*