Metropolitan Hilarion: Summit of the heads of Churches is possible in foreseeable future



An interview of Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, Chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations, to RIA Novosti

–Your Eminence, is Patriarch Theophilos or any other Church leader planning another meeting of the kind of the Amman summit this year, and if so, when concretely? What do you know about actions and negotiations, if any, towards this goal?

I would like to point out that all the delegations that took part in the Amman meeting last February expressed their intention to continue the brotherly meetings of the heads and representatives of Local Churches. Back then they expressed their wish, as is specified in the Communique, to come together again "preferably before the end of the year." Of course, at that time none of us expected the pandemic and that many plans would not be destined to be carried out. No wonder then that a year after the Amman meeting, Patriarch Theophilos of Jerusalem in his message recalled the plans outlined at that time. Although the risk of the Covid morbidity in the world is still high, quarantine measures are gradually

being weakened in some countries, as the number of people with immunity to this disease is growing because some have already had it and others have had the vaccination against it. Under these circumstances, the prospects for a new meeting of the Heads in the foreseeable future look promising. However, I think that to speak about concrete dates is early yet. I would like to remind you that Patriarch Theophilos was the initiator of the meeting last year. I suppose that next meeting, if it is to take place, would be called together also by him as the Head of the Jerusalem Church, the Mother of all Churches. The Russian Orthodox Church, for its part, welcomes the conducting of this kind of events looking for ways out fr om the crisis among the Orthodox and for the re-establishment of their unity.

– Can we say that since the beginning of Zelensky's presidency the seizure of the church buildings belonging to the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church has stopped? Have there been any cases of the return of parish churches from the schismatics so far?

– Isolated incidents of the seizure and the attempted seizure have continued into the present time. For the most part these are the cases when the schismatics manage to falsify the re-registration of the parishes, which started in the President Poroshenko years. Wh ere the local authorities are under the influence of the radical political forces and sympathize with the schismatics, the latter succeed in getting the upper hand by gaining the ownership of church buildings with the help of fictitious documents.

It is important to know that in a number of regions in Ukraine the radical political forces attempted to gain revenge during the 2020 local elections, which led to general aggravation of the political struggle and to an increase of pressure on the canonical Church on the local level. The central authorities are not always capable of controlling the local developments. But in the majority of the regions, the process of the fictitious "re-registration" of parishes followed by the seizure of church buildings was stopped. The schismatics ascribe this fact to the pandemic and quarantine measures, implying that once the pandemic is over all would join them. Actually, without organized pressure on the part of the central and local authorities no mass transitions are possible. This process is not of religious nature. Its character is political, and the majority of the parishes of the canonical Church are not interested in it.

But then, the executive authorities have not restituted the seized church buildings of the canonical Church to the lawful owners, though there are rulings of the court to that effect. Many communities have constructed new church buildings to replace the seized ones or are in the process of construction.

– Can President Zelensky stop pressure on the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church?

– The plain fact is that the rights of the believers of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church have been violated. Some European and international human rights organizations, which are not always unbiased, often enough publish documents admitting many facts of religious discrimination in Ukraine.

The President of Ukraine is entitled to direct participation in the process of passing the laws with the right of veto. He has the right to apply to the Ukraine's Constitutional Court on the issues pertaining to the constitutionality of certain laws. The Ukrainian President is guarantor of Constitution and of the rights and freedoms of citizens and has wide administrative authority, but discriminative bills adopted in the Poroshenko years against the largest confession in Ukraine have not been repealed. Today, new discriminative bills have been introduced into Verhovna Rada. Hopefully, the Ukrainian President's response would be adequate and suiting the situation.

– Mass media discussed a possible reception to the Moscow Patriarchate of clerics of the Patriarchate of Alexandria, who disagree with their Patriarch's recognition of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. Was there such a request on their part? Will the Russian Church receive these clerics?

– Indeed, we have received individual and mass requests from clerics from different countries in Africa We sincerely wish to render them all possible support, but so far we have suspended judgment on their reception to the Russian Church, because we do not want to deepen divisions existing among Orthodox Christians in Africa due in large part to the recognition of Ukrainian schismatics by Patriarch Theodoros. Yet, we go on hoping that Patriarch Theodoros will change his mind.

Interview by Olga Lipich

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