Chancellor of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church: Visit of Patriarch Bartholomew may lead to a new round of seizures of our church buildings and to general destabilization



The visit of Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople to Ukraine on the Independence Day may turn up pressure on the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. This opinion was expressed by Chancellor of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Metropolitan Anthony of Borispol and Brovary on April 8, 2021, at a press-breakfast in the Kiev Lavra of the Caves. “The Ukrainian Orthodox Church at the time of pandemic and acute political situation in Ukraine and on international arena” was the topic of the press conference.

“As regards inviting Patriarch Bartholomew on a visit, we from the very beginning spoke of its inexpedience. This opinion of ours comes from our willingness to preserve public stability in the country,” said Metropolitan Anthony.

He pointed out that Patriarch Bartholomew was personally responsible for the troubles experienced by the parishes of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in the past few years, when its church buildings were seized by force and secretly re-registered and priests beaten up. He was responsible “for the

destabilization and intention to destroy the canonical Orthodox Church."

Although Metropolitan Anthony believes that the current government does not seek to systematically interfere in the religious life, the visit of the head of the Patriarchate of Constantinople "could serve as a new stimulus for a return to the destructive policy, insomuch as the current government one way or another is going in the fairway of the trends that existed under President Poroshenko."

"The visit may lead to a new round of seizures of our church buildings and to general destabilization. This is why we are against Bartholomew's visit," said the hierarch and assured that in case of the escalation of religious troubles for the UOC, the Church would resist by all legal means available to it.

"As a matter of fact," underlined Metropolitan Anthony, "the internal contradictions in the OCU have not emerged today, but have been there from the very beginning. The government artificially united two schismatic groups without removing all their inner contradictions."

Metropolitan Anthony reminded those present of the fact that the head of the disestablished Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kievan Patriarchate (UOC KP), Filaret Denisenko, "who is the founding father of the organized schismatic movement in Ukraine," left the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) right from its formation.

"This kind of contradictions inevitably would be growing. There is no intrinsic religious ground, no hard core for a life together. Until now in different cities one can meet so-called bishops both of the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC) and of the Kievan Patriarchate, whereas the goal, in my understanding, is to have one so called bishop in the future. All these developments are very painful as involving the seizure of church buildings. I would like to assert that the future awaiting the OCU as an official organization will be nothing but strife, discord and all kinds of divisions," said the UOC chancellor.

A pan-Orthodox meeting to offer a real possibility for settling the church problem in Ukraine was another topic raised at the press-conference. "We understand that dialogue of Local Orthodox Churches would probably be the only possible and real way to settle the Ukrainian problem, and also to make an attempt to restore the unity of the Orthodox world that now is under an imminent threat," said Metropolitan Anthony and added: "The Statement issued by Patriarch Theophilos on the occasion of the anniversary of the Amman Conference says that this precisely is the foundation to build up our hope for the restoration of unity we are little by little losing."

According to the UOC chancellor, much depends now on the pandemic which has overtaken the whole world and does not allow us to prepare a new meeting on a pan-Orthodox level. Nevertheless, he is sure

that exactly this kind of meeting will provide for the settlement of the existing problems, “regardless of Phanar being against it, which is understandable since questions will be addressed to Patriarch Bartholomew in the first place, because it is his actions that have caused our problems in Ukraine, which now are transferring onto the pan-Orthodox level.”

Talking with mass media representatives Metropolitan Anthony told them about the motivation underlying the anti-church laws passed by Ukrainian politicians, as well as about the detrimental consequences for Ukrainian state and society such laws may result in.

Metropolitan Anthony underscored that legislative acts against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church contradicted the Constitution of Ukraine and would inevitably inflict destabilization in the society and therefore had no right to exist.

The chancellor explained why some politicians would put forward anti-church draft laws. He mentioned in particular that such politicians hoped to influence future elections in this way and cover up economic failures.

“There are probably quite a few motives. Some experts say that in this way the political forces want to attract a certain segment of voters and to win their votes in favour. Other experts assert that with the help of such acts politicians try to hide the problems in the economic sphere and stir up some sort of agitation distracting people and keeping their attention away from the economic and social problems,” the hierarch said.

Meanwhile, in the opinion of Metropolitan Anthony, politicians should be aware that we all are temporary living beings in this life, and the political life does not last forever either. Moreover, they should not forget about the service to the state and people to which they are elected.

The UOC chancellor compared the country to a ship steered by politicians elected by people.

“After all, people elect them and give them certain levers of power, while God gives instruments for steering the ship so that she is on her right course, is not lost on the reefs and arrives in harbor of the prospering state which we wish with all our hearts. Yet, it seems that some politicians are making a hole in the bottom for water to leak instead of steering the ship. But one must understand that if a ship sinks, all people on board will be drowned, and not only common people, but politicians too,” the UOC hierarch said and added: “The Church asks politicians to be responsible for their ministry because everyone will give account of his doings to the Lord.”

Metropolitan Anthony continued to say: “We are trying to meet with politicians of different political

trends to convey our opinion and our convictions to them and to reach out to their conscience, because a politician, even if he is not a believer and does not accept Christian canons, would not move away from his conscience."

He also commented on the question whether the Ukrainian Orthodox Church expects more anti-church actions of the authorities.

"We do not know how our authorities will behave. Today, they do not feel a need to complicate social life, remembering that religious life is a part of social life, but the specific nature of religious life is very delicate. We see certain movements in Ukraine and pressure on the Church not from within, but from abroad." the hierarch said.

He noted that the issue of Ukrainian Orthodoxy and pressure on the UOC is a political issue, rather than a religious one.

"If the Lord blesses us to endure more difficulties, we will accept it as a cross, but as the citizens of Ukraine we will take every possible measure to ensure our rights and protect our faithful, our parishes, our monasteries, and the Church. We are the citizens of Ukraine, our Fatherland, and no one can take away our being Ukrainians. We will always live in our country and work for making it even more beautiful and for its development. Our overall purpose is to save human souls and bring them to Eternity," Metropolitan Anthony said.

He believes that the authorities cannot ignore the Appeal of the UOC faithful sent to the Presidential office, as the greater part of them have voted for the current authorities.

His Eminence stated that "not so much time has passed" since the appeal signed by over one million people in defense of the Church had been sent to the Presidential office. So far, no clearly defined answer. He believes, however, that "they will not be able to ignore the appeal, because it concerns destinies of the real people who are the citizens of Ukraine."

Metropolitan Antony explained that the faithful of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church not only represent the largest confession in Ukraine, but are it citizens enjoying full rights, "and it is no secret that the greater part of our parishioners have voted in favour of President Zelensky."

"Our faithful wish justice. They were expecting that the state authorities led by the new President would put an end to systematic persecution of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and try to introduce legislative standards into the law that would correspond to the Constitution while not running contrary to the international obligations of Ukraine."

However, in case we do not receive an answer to our appeal, “it will be necessary to find other forms of the quest for justice. Yet we believe that common sense will prevail and the authorities will pay attention to the UOC and hear its voice which is the voice of the citizens.”

Concerning the situation in the southeast of Ukraine, the hierarch underscored that the Ukrainian Orthodox Church has always been trying to convey a persuasive peace-making message to all.

He said: “It is a very sensitive matter, and the Church is aware of the tragic situation because we live in the entire territory of Ukraine, and our parishes are located on both sides of the front line. It is very important for the politicians on whom the situation depends to use all levers of their power. Many people are talking about new hostilities. This is awesome. Yet no one says anything about what should be done for preventing them. Diplomats must “wage a war” in discussions at the negotiating table in order to forestall the real armed hostilities.”

The UOC chancellor added: “From the very beginning of the conflict the Church has been trying to make her appeal to peace being heard.” Among other things, the Church organized “People of Peace” forum at which common suffering people were talking.

“We render aid to real people. At the beginning of the conflict we provided food and shelter. Now, we help those waiting in line at border crossing stations for hours. We shout loudly to politicians asking them to do anything possible to end the bloodshed,” Metropolitan Anthony said.

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