Bishop Sylvester of Belogorodka: Constantinople's actions against Ukraine is the unprecedented example of violation of canonical norms



In an interview published on the website of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Bishop Sylvester of Belogorodka, rector of the Kiev Theological Academy and Seminary, spoke, in particular, about the situation in the world Orthodoxy caused by the uncanonical actions of the Patriarchate of Constantinople.

– Good afternoon! Vladyka Sylvester, bless!

– Good afternoon! God bless you!

– We are in the Kiev Theological Academy at the Kiev Caves Lavra. You studied at the Odessa Theological Seminary and at the Moscow Theological Academy and had an

opportunity to compare different theological schools. What effect does the proximity of the Lavra have on students of theological institutions?

– The proximity of the Lavra is, no doubt, a positive thing for the theological schools. As far back as the 19th century, when reforms of theological education were being carried out during the Synodal period, the following issue was under discussion: should seminaries and academies be autonomous, built in places not associated with monastic life or, on the contrary, situated in proximity to monasteries and lavras? There were different points of view, but many respected hierarchs and rectors pointed out that nearness to a monastery or even location of a theological school in the territory of a large monastery or lavra had a very beneficial effect on youth.

There is always a risk that a young person may lose touch with real spiritual life, with liturgical life, with the tradition of asceticism. Let's be honest: youth is youth and it takes its toll on a student, no matter where he studies, at a theological or secular educational institution. Life in a monastery itself with its rhythm and quietness is a reminder of the meaning and order of Christian life. During the Liturgy we pray for a calm life; not for an exciting, remarkable, interesting life. We pray for a life of calmness. It is the ideal of Christian life, and not only monks and nuns, but all Christians are to live up to it. So when young people see an example of such calm life, it is very beneficial for them. Besides, up to this day it is mostly monasteries that have been maintaining the standard when it comes to divine services, arranging of church life and spiritual guidance. So if a young man becomes a priest, it does not matter where he will later carry out his service. Be it at large, small, rural or city parishes, he will be guided by that standard thanks to his experience of living in a monastery.

Historically the Kiev Theological Academy and Seminary were located not in the territory of a monastery, but in downtown Kiev. The Divine providence ordained it so that in the late 1980s, when it became possible to reopen the seminary, it could only be done in the Kiev Caves Lavra. The Kiev Theological Academy was opened practically at the same time. Therefore, the revival of monastic life in the Lavra and the revival of the Kiev theological schools are linked by bonds of time and personalities.

– What is the current status of the Kiev Theological Academy and Seminary? Does it have accreditation of the Ministry of Education of Ukraine?

– Thirty years have passed since the reestablishment of the Kiev Theological Seminary and Academy. Regretfully, at the moment we do not have state accreditation, albeit our educational institution is officially registered by the state. In our life in the academy and seminary we take into consideration the recommendations given by the Ukrainian Ministry of Education. Actually we find ourselves in a very interesting situation. Our diplomas are not recognized by the state, but every diploma individually can undergo nostrification procedure at a special commission under the Ministry of Education. Despite a

rather complicated religious situation in Ukraine, people working at the Ministry of Education are willing to help us in recognizing our diplomas. I will note that accreditation of educational programmes and fulfilment of licence conditions is a long process, and the Kiev Theological Academy makes every effort to develop its educational resources with this in view.

– What is the procedure for enrolling in the Kiev Theological Academy and Seminary (KTA&S)? Who are its graduates?

– The procedure for enrolling in the KTA&S is the same as in other theological schools. First of all, an applicant needs a letter of recommendation fr om a priest or bishop. He also must provide a high school diploma, results of the External Independent Evaluation, a conscript card or a military ID card, and certain medical certificates. Every applicant takes exams and comes for an interview. I would like to note that the interview is very important, for we try not only to assess a person's knowledge, but also learn about his interests, skills, etc.

Our main task is to decide if an applicant has a bent for pastoral service, which can be manifold: some have a gift for preaching, others for scholarly activities, still others for working with youth and people in distress. We must discern and cultivate these talents in our students in the course of their studies.

– What language is used for teaching?

– All documents circulating in the KTA&S are in the Ukrainian language. As for the language in which lectures are delivered it varies. Some professors read them in Russian, and some in Ukrainian. The same applies to qualifying papers: some students write them in Ukrainian, while others in Russian. For example, I used to read the course of Dogmatic Theology in Russian, and my successor reads the same course in Ukrainian. The principal task of a lecturer is not to push forward his ideological or other ideas and views, but to create an effective learning environment for students. The issue of the language of teaching, in my opinion, should be resolved from this perspective.

– How many students currently studying at the KTA&S are ready to choose the path of pastoral ministry? Wh ere are they from? Are there any students from the Local Orthodox Churches?

– At present we have 298 full-time students and some 700 people taking extramural courses. For big universities these are not high figures. Yet, we are the seminary with the largest number of students in the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Our full-time students mainly come from Ukraine, but we also have students from Belarus and Moldova. We used to have students from other countries, from other Local Orthodox Churches, for instance, Serbs and Poles. Unfortunately, because of coronavirus it is not

possible at the moment. Yet, we hope that when the pandemic ends we will be able to admit students from other countries again.

– This academic year, as well as the second half of the previous year the KTA&S have been mostly working remotely. How did you cope with the difficulties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic? How did it affect the educational process?

– We faced serious difficulties, and in various publications at our official platforms we explained the situation that had arisen at the Kiev theological schools. Because of coronavirus and its aftermaths, Ukraine, like the rest of the world, has found itself in a very uncertain and complicated situation. Therefore, it was hard to take decisions, not understanding and not knowing how it would unfold. To tell the truth, it had an adverse impact on the teaching process.

I believe that educational process should be consistent and uninterrupted. A student and a lecturer should meet in a lecture hall. Of course, there are online forms and numerous platforms allowing to arrange that. Being not only the rector, but also a lecturer I feel it unnatural to read lectures in front of a computer. I need to see students, their reaction, their eyes, and I need them to see me. I treasure such moments and such atmosphere. Unfortunately, these two trying years have had a negative effect on the educational process. Several times we sent all students home and taught them remotely. Surely, it affects the quality of education. That is why our Kiev theological schools wish and pray that the academic activities may be back on track in the nearest future.

– COVID-19 restrictions have affected many universities throughout the world, including the Faculty of Orthodox Theology of the University of Belgrade. Did you have a chance to visit the Faculty of Theology in Belgrade? What forms does the cooperation between the KTA&S and the Faculty of Theology take, based on the agreements of 2013 signed by the former KTA&S rector, now Metropolitan Anthony of Borispol and Brovary?

– Indeed, during his tenure as rector, Vladyka Antony signed agreements with great many Orthodox educational institutions, including the Faculty of Theology in Belgrade. I was a member of the delegation that went to Belgrade in 2013 to sign the agreement. It was my first and so far only trip to Belgrade.

We strive to develop these relationships. First of all, in accordance with the agreement we exchange students, postgraduate students and scholars. Until recently, that is before the pandemic, our postgraduate students would go to Belgrade from time to time to search for scholarly literature or work at archives, writing their qualifying papers. In their studies they received assistance from the supreme authority of the Serbian Church and from the dean’s office of the Belgrade Faculty of Theology. We in Kiev welcomed scholars coming in search of information and literature, taking part in our conferences

and delivering lectures for our students.

We have established warm and friendly relations with some representatives of the University of Belgrade, for instance, with Prof. Vladislav Puzović who at various times came to read lectures at the KTA&S. He carried out research on the Serbs who had studied at theological schools in the imperial period, and when he came to us in Kiev we did our best to help him.

Our cooperation with the University of Belgrade also takes form of publications of our respective scholars' research papers in academic journals of the Belgrade Faculty of Theology and the Kiev Theological Academy. There are other areas of joint work. Bit by bit, we try to reconstruct the history of the Kiev theological science associated to a large extent with Serbia, since after the Revolution of 1917 many prominent historians and theologians from our Academy lived and worked in Serbia. It is true not only of hierarchs, but of some renowned professors as well. Perhaps, one of our most well-known professors was Archpriest Feodor Titov. The second half of his life was associated with Serbia, the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Serbian theological science.

–You had an opportunity to lecture at the Russian Orthodox University of St. John the Theologian. At present you are lecturing at the Kiev Theological Academy. Can you compare teaching and education at theological faculties to that at theological academies? Are they complementary or separate educational institutions?

–I lectured at the Russian Orthodox University of St. John the Theologian as a student with the blessing of its rector Archbishop Yevgeny, now Metropolitan of Tallinn and Estonia. That very interesting experience was very important to me, and, what is more, it was my first teaching experience.

Certainly, there is a difference between Orthodox universities or theological faculties and seminaries or academies first of all in the rhythm of life, in educational process, disciplinary measures, and so on. Yet, in my judgment we should have both systems of teaching – in seminary and academy and at theological faculties. A great many people wish to pursue theological science without committing themselves to priesthood for a variety of reasons. Theological faculties are for them. We should not forget that only men can study at seminaries and academies, but there are many young girls and women wishing to acquire insight into theology. So, theological faculties are for them, too.

We do not have a theological faculty at the Kiev Theological Academy, but we have the three-year courses for catechists. The majority of course participants wish to be educated in theology. Attending the courses are teachers of Sunday schools for children, teenagers and adults. Also, large parishes develop various kinds of work with youth, in prisons and hospitals. Those coming there must first of all be able to talk with people, console, guide and support them.

–The creation of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine and its so called Tomos on autocephaly have affected the entire Orthodox world. Before asking about the impact of these events on the Kiev Theological Academy, I would like you to give comments for the faithful of the Serbian Orthodox Church on how did it come about?

–First of all I would like to note that all actions of the Patriarch of Constantinople against Ukraine are the unprecedented example of violation of canonical norms. Besides, this is violation of the standards of morality. I believe that the representatives of Phanar – and this is evident to everyone – have been motivated by their personal power-hungry wishes. Today we are witnessing the unprecedented attempts of Phanar to establish a church order under the leadership of the Patriarchate of Constantinople empowering it with special powers. Most certainly, this contradicts the ancient traditional conciliar principle exercised by the Church in line with the Ecumenical and Local Councils.

Patriarch Bartholomew has resolved the Ukrainian issue by himself without obtaining agreement of the Russian Church and other Orthodox Churches. I will give you a spectacular example: the Phanariots and all Local Churches had considered former metropolitan Filaret (Denisenko) a schismatic during many decades. Before taking any decision on Ukraine, Patriarch Bartholomew should have heard the views of the Local Orthodox Churches. By his decision Patriarch Bartholomew has shown his attitude not only to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, but to all Local Churches and to the issue of church order. 'Eastern papism' is taking full advantage. It is clear that any bishop, who thinks that he has special powers, opportunities and status and seeks theological justification of his opinion, will inevitably embark on the path of papism.

One should bear in mind that the Roman Catholic teaching about Pope did not appear in the result of one-day work. The development of the Roman papism was a long-time process that went in many different directions. Likewise, the development of the Constantinople papism is an ongoing process. It is not a recent phenomenon. I would like to note that already in the 19th century some canon lawyers and historians of the Russian Orthodox Church used the term "Eastern papism" regarding the Patriarch of Constantinople. So, there is no novelty in our using it today. But as it often happens, it was our vain hope to expect that the phenomenon of "Eastern papism" would not continue to develop and that the Patriarch of Constantinople would not overstep the "red lines" and go beyond acceptable boundaries, but he has done it. And now, regretfully, the Orthodox world has found itself plunged into a serious crisis.

–How has this development affected the Ukrainian Orthodox Church?

–Our Ukrainian Orthodox Church is a canonically vested Church of Ukraine. No matter how loudly and

insistently the adepts of the new church structure are reiterating that ours is not a Church and that we have no right to exist, the reality is that the only canonically lawful Orthodox Church in Ukraine is the one which is headed by His Beatitude Metropolitan Onufry of Kiev and All Ukraine.

–What is to become of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church? Are there any plans to reach some sort of a compromise solution to form one Local Ukrainian Church?

–At the current stage, the question of the formation of one national Church is an abstract one. To broach this subject in a situation of the present set-up looks unreasonable. However, what is to become of our Church in three, five or ten years is a question that concerns not only Ukraine and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, but the world Orthodoxy as a whole. Everyone must see that the Ukrainian problem serves Patriarch Bartholomew and his supporters to achieve much more ambitious goals that are of global significance. In other words, with the help of a local problem global tasks are being solved. The global objective of Phanar is to form an ecclesiastical order under Phanar's leadership that would empower the head with absolute ruling authority and all the rights, including control over the Diaspora, receiving appeals, and many others.

They try to achieve this goal through Ukraine. Everyone who accepts the legitimacy of Phanar's actions regarding Ukraine should be aware that in some five or ten years the same may happen to other Local Orthodox Churches; and fifty years off now, the successors of Patriarch Bartholomew would position themselves in terms and categories that are absolutely alien to the Orthodox conscience and doctrine.

That is why every Christian of this or that Local Orthodox Church should ask and honestly answer the question about what could happen to the world Orthodoxy if Local Churches recognized the legitimacy of Patriarch Bartholomew's actions. An honest answer to this question would make anyone aware of an imminent danger hanging over the Orthodox Church. I believe that the only possible way of resistance to Phanar's actions will be for the Local Churches to challenge these actions by declaring their position.

–Today the Ukrainian Orthodox Church is suffering through hard times. But there is always hope that temporary difficulties will pass and everything will fall into place. Do you make any plans for the future of Kiev Theological Academy and Seminary? Will there be any changes, projects, conferences?

–Yes, of course. We have conferences twice a year – in autumn and in spring. This year we are going to do our best to revive our practice and experience in this respect. In addition, we plan to hold more round-table meetings and seminars. I think it is very important. We must exchange our viewpoints, different as they might be, and try to hear other people, our opponents in particular. This is an important part of educational process and we will take care of it, of course. Undoubtedly we are going to invite

representatives of other Local Orthodox Churches to take part in our events. I hope that Serbian scholars of theology would attend them as guests and participants.

–May it be God's will! Thank you, Vladyka, for this informative talk.

–Always glad to oblige!

Interviewed by Nikolay Sapsay

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