



Metropolitan Hilarion: the Russian Orthodox Church does not want primacy in the Orthodox world



Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople accused the Russian Orthodox Church of claims to the primacy in the Orthodox world and to the right of granting autocephaly to Abkhazia, and made a few other strong statements speaking on one of the Georgian TV channels. Metropolitan Hilarion, chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations, commented on these accusations in an interview to RIA Novosti as follows:

– Your Eminence, what are the grounds for the alleged accusations against the Moscow Patriarchate of pursuing the “Third Rome ideology” and of craving for the leadership in the Orthodox world?

– This is an outdated rhetoric of the Cold War dating back to the 1960s. Last year, the CIA declassified

and then published a number of interesting documents opening this subject. Back then the Intelligence Service of the United States through contacts with Patriarch Athenagoras of Constantinople was actively working out a possibility of using the Patriarchate of Constantinople as a counterbalance to the Soviet influence on the Orthodox world. It was at that time that the arguments alleging that the Russian Church was striving for the primacy in the Orthodox world and that we were proclaiming the ideology of the “Third Rome” started to be widely used.

Later, the theses related to this subject were heard during contacts of the Phanar (center of the Church of Constantinople in Istanbul) leadership with American diplomats.

– And how are things really going? Doesn’t the Russian Church want to rank first in the Orthodox world?

– Not, of course. This is pure mythologeme, and I have repeatedly said it. We are quite happy with our place in the diptychs. Our official position regarding the primacy in the Orthodox Church is set out in a document passed by the Holy Synod in 2007. Anyone can read it.

Before our involuntary break of communication with Constantinople we had recognized the Constantinople See’s primacy of honour in compliance with the canons of the Ecumenical Councils. There is neither official document, nor official statement of the Russian Church, or any of our Patriarch’s presentations proclaiming Moscow the Third Rome.

The “Third Rome” idea is both religious and political one. It came to Russia from Byzantium in the 16th century. In 1589 in a special document - Ulozhennaya Gramota - on the establishment of patriarchate in Russia, Patriarch Jeremiah II of Constantinople described the Tsardom of Russia as “the Third Rome, the religious righteousness of which has surpassed that of all others.” But the Russian Church has never been officially approved such ideology.

To assert that the Russian Church is guided in its actions by the “Third Rome” ideology is like saying that the Patriarchate of Constantinople is struggling for the realization of the so-called “Great Idea” – the restoration of the Greek state within the former borders of the Byzantine Empire. Meanwhile, there is difference between the former and latter assumptions. In the 20th century indeed there were adherents to the “Great Idea” among the Patriarchs of Constantinople – Patriarch Meletius (Metaxakis) in the first place, whereas, there was none among the Patriarchs of Moscow to support the idea of the “Third Rome.”

– Do you agree with Patriarch Bartholomew’s statement that “the Russian Church has no right to grant autocephaly not only to Abkhazia but also to anyone in general?”

–I am sorry, but the question as such is absurd. The Russian Church has never claimed to the right of granting autocephaly to “anyone in general.” It is Constantinople that lays exclusive claim to granting autocephaly to anyone. At the same time however, history knows cases of autocephaly granted by Churches other than the Patriarchate of Constantinople. For example, the ancient Georgian Church received autocephaly from the Patriarchate of Antioch.

Abkhazia and South Ossetia are recognized as belonging to the jurisdiction of the Georgian Patriarchate, and the Russian Church has never questioned that.

– But the Russian Church at one time in the past granted autocephaly to its parishes in North America.

–Yes, true. This happened because Orthodoxy in North America came into being thanks to the preaching of Russian monks and Russian missionaries. Thanks to their selfless efforts and the breadth of missionary outlook the Orthodox Church in America did not lock itself within one national tradition, but was able to integrate deeply into the life of its home country.

Now it is a completely self-sufficient independent Church, with its own statute and liturgical traditions, with its own inner lifestyle and its own individual stance on preaching the Gospel and on the place of the Church in the world.

– Has Moscow Patriarchate ever wished “to get to the richest Orthodox community in America,” as Patriarch Bartholomew said?

–I do not see anything bad or humiliating in the financial support being given by the Greek diaspora in the USA to the Patriarchate of Constantinople, which finds itself in reduced circumstances. Anyhow, this support speaks for piety and patriotism of the Greek diaspora in the USA. However, it would have been a worst mistake to project its current financial relationship with Phanar onto the history of the Russian Church’s mission in North America.

I believe that St. Herman of Alaska who preached to the Aleuts on Kodiak Island in the 18th century thought about profit least of all. Besides, how the granting of autocephaly could bring profit to the Russian Church, even hypothetically?

– Is it appropriate to compare the process of recognizing the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) established on the basis of Ukrainian schismatic structures and made autocephalous by Constantinople with the recognition of autocephaly of the Orthodox Church in America

(OCA), which Patriarch Bartholomew called “the pseudo-autocephalous church that has not yet been recognized by anyone?”

– It is interesting to note that he said these words to the Georgian mass media, whereas the Georgian Orthodox Church was one of the first to recognize the autocephaly of the Orthodox Church in America. The OCA autocephalous status is recognized by a great part of the Local Orthodox Churches. Needless to say that no one in Constantinople has hesitations about canonicity of the Primate and bishops of the Orthodox Church in America. Patriarch Bartholomew and heads of other Local Orthodox Churches used to meet and concelebrate with His Beatitude Metropolitan Tikhon.

And how many Primates apart from Patriarch Bartholomew have concelebrated with Epiphany Dumenko (head of the OCU) so far? Even those Orthodox hierarchs who agreed to recognize the Ukrainian schismatics under pressure keep away from concelebrating with them.

– What do you think about a source of information given to Patriarch Bartholomew about a bishop of the Russian Church in Abkhazia and South Ossetia?

– This information might be conveyed to him by incompetent advisers. I have got acquainted myself with the Georgian interview and its unauthorized English translation, but it was hard to hear the recorded words of the Patriarch who was speaking Greek. If Patriarch Bartholomew really said it, then it is a delusion. The Russian Church has no bishop either in Abkhazia, or in South Ossetia.

We have noticed long ago that the Patriarchate of Constantinople was sometimes ill-informed, for instance, on the Ukrainian issue.

– What can You say about information on the Ukrainian issue?

– As far as I have heard, Patriarch Bartholomew’s advisers had not told him in good time that some of schismatics he recognized in Ukraine had no apostolic succession. Either our information has not reached the Patriarch, or he has disregarded it.

In Ukraine he ‘reinstated Metropolitan of Lvov’, a former married archpriest who before lapsing into schism had not been a metropolitan occupying the chair of Lvov.

The reports and documents officially and unofficially published in defense of the interference of Constantinople into Ukraine contain quite a few egregious errors regarding history and internal life of the Russian Church.

I believe that the key man has been ill-informed, or we are talking either about a misunderstanding, or about another propagandistic mythologeme like “the Third Rome” fable and our alleged aspiration for “world dominion.”

– What do You think about a possible improving of the situation on the part of Constantinople?

– There is a proverb in the Russian language “You must measure seven times before you start cutting.” If we wish to reestablish the unity of Orthodoxy, we need a dialogue.

In August 2018 His Holiness Patriarch Kirill visited Istanbul and made a proposal to Patriarch Bartholomew not to jump to conclusions, but to make a common thorough study of the Ukrainian ecclesiastical issue on a solid scientific basis. To deep regret of the entire Orthodoxy, Patriarch Bartholomew said that he had no time for that.

Interviewed by Olga Lipich

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