



## Metropolitan Hilarion: the work of the DECR can be compared to the service of border-guards



*75 years ago, in 1946, the Russian Orthodox Church got its own Ministry of Foreign Affairs. After three decades of terrible years of persecution, the Church was able to establish new social contacts and begin peacemaking activities. For this, the oldest synodal department for external Church relations was established. Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, Chairman of Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations, spoke about those years in an interview with the "Rossiyskaya Gazeta".*

**- Your Eminence, during the Great Patriotic War the Church, despite long-standing pre-war repressions, was side by side with the fighting people. Everybody knows about Stalin's telegram of January 1943 to Metropolitan Sergiy, in which the leader thanked the Church for her patriotic stand, returned to the Church the status of legal identity and allowed her to open accounts for collecting funds for the front. Was the establishment of the department, which you are heading today, necessary for ultimately breaking the isolation of the Russian**

## **Orthodox Church?**

- The Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate was formed soon after the Great Patriotic War, in 1946. In that period, especially pressing was support for developing the peace-making activity of the Church, her first contacts after the three decades of continued persecutions. Even in those trying conditions, the Church began to come out gradually from the isolation, building the first bridges with Christians of other confessions, representatives of other religions, with the Russian church diaspora.
- **But there appeared in time the so-called Khrushchev reform that actually enabled a rollback to the most horrible times in the relations between the Soviet state and the Church...**
- During the new intensification of struggle against the Church, the external church contacts (especially in the international work) helped to a considerable extent to contain the persecutions and sometimes made it more difficult for the authorities to close and destroy monasteries and churches.

Metropolitan Nikodim (Rotov), the second head of the DECR after Metropolitan Nikolay (Yarushevich), managed to secure the appointment of young bishops to succeed sees abroad so that later on they could serve already in the Motherland. Thanks to this, the Church succeeded in increasing considerably the episcopate by replenishing it with young bishops.

### **- From your point of view, when did the new revival of Russia, religious and spiritual, begin, in which your Department took part?**

- The event that marked the fundamental turn in the status of the Russian Orthodox Church and the beginning of the spiritual rebirth of the peoples in the then territory of the USSR can be seen in the celebrations held in 1988 to mark the Millennium of the Baptism of Rus'. The DECR made a great contribution, exclusive in its complexity and importance, to this festivity, which became an event of not only national but also international significance.

In 1988, the Department became to be headed by Archbishop Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad, now Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia. It was a very special period in the DECR's history; it was marked not only with a new level of already existing relations with the state and society but also with the emergence of a new area of work - social service, relationships with the army and law enforcement bodies... Besides, the Department began playing the role of a center coordinating the work to develop important church documents. I would like to make a special mention of the Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church adopted in 2000 by the Bishops' Council.

Among epoch-making events, which were prepared with an active involvement of the DECR, was the signing in 2007 of the Act of Canonical Communion between the Moscow Patriarchate with the Russian Church Outside Russia, which marked the restoration of canonical unity within the Local Orthodox Church.

Among the special concerns of the Department for External Church Relations was care for Orthodox compatriots who had found themselves outside Russia.

**- What are the most important tasks for inter-church relations facing the Department today?**

- I will dwell only on some of them. The work of the DECR can be compared with the service of border-guards: we are called to safeguard the external boundaries of our Church. The hardest challenge facing the Russian Orthodox Church just as the whole Orthodox world at present are now anti-canonical actions of the Patriarch of Constantinople, who, by his recognition of the schismatics in Ukraine and claims to have a certain special power over other Churches not only has destroyed the relations with the Moscow Patriarchate but also has provoked divisions in the world Orthodoxy. The DECR is helping to develop possible ways for coming out of this very grave situation.

At the same time, we continue broadening our bilateral fraternal relations with various Local Orthodox Church.

An enormous problem in our time is the persecution of Christian in the Middle East, North Africa and a number of other regions of the world. The Russian Orthodox Church was one of the first to point to the enormous scale of persecutions against Christians, which has resulted in some countries in a ten or more times decrease of the Christian population. We have helped to bring the discussion on this problem up to the international level, seeking to draw the world community's attention to the danger of eradicating the Christian presence in the Middle East region. In this sphere, the Russian Orthodox Church has a developed cooperation with other Christian confessions, in particular, the Roman Catholic Church.

**- What are other affairs that connect you with other confessions?**

- It is, for instance, the response to the challenges of secularism when in the modern society, especially the Western one, Christian and simple traditional moral and family values are being ousted.

In the area of preserving religious and moral values, we share the views of people of traditional religions in our country. This topic have been repeatedly raised in the statements of the Interreligious Council in

Russia in which Orthodox Christians, Muslims, adherents to Judaism and Buddhists are represented.

In recent years, among the pressing topics of the DECR's work has been our participation in rendering aid to people affected by war in Syria and in restoring peaceful life in it. We are actively involved in the work of the Interreligious Working Group for humanitarian aid to the Syrian population attached to the Presidential Council for Cooperation with Religious Associations. As part of this work, several large humanitarian aid supplies were brought and distributed to both Christians and Muslims. With the participation of Russian religious organizations, a general education school in one of the districts in Damascus almost fully destroyed during hostilities was restored. The DECR staffers and I have repeatedly visited that country suffering from the consequences of war. We seek to help the Patriarchate of Antioch in restoring Orthodox shrines ruined by terrorist units.

In addition, the Department for External Church Relations is monitoring the project for securing prosthesis for children who have lost limbs. Some of them have already undergone rehabilitation in Moscow but there will be an opportunity to help an even greater number of children in the rehabilitation center created at the Damascus Representation of the Russian Orthodox Church.

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