Metropolitan Hilarion: An idea of Belarusian Church autocephaly is being promoted to destabilize situation in the country



On 10th July 2021, on the "The Church and the World" TV programme which comes out on Rossia-24 on Saturdays and Sundays, Metropolitan of Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations, answered questions put by the channel's host Ekaterina Gracheva.

E.Gracheva: Hello. This is the "The Church and the World" TV programme on Rossia-24. We are talking with the chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk. Hello, Your Eminence.

Metropolitan Hilarion:Hello, Yekaterina. Hello, dear brothers and sisters!

E.Gracheva: We have recently talked about the unity of Christianity and the unity of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. You told me that this issue had become widely debated again as it is in the interest the Patriarch of Constantinople for affirming his primacy in the Orthodox world. On this background the news came of the Pope receiving a high-level delegation fr om the Patriarchate of Constantinople. Naturally, I have a question: if a formal pronouncement might follow about the unity of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, may we expect an official response of the Russian Orthodox Church in keeping with your words said in our programme?

Metropolitan Hilarion: There had been already in the history of the Orthodox Church one case when the Patriarchate of Constantinople signed a union with the Roman Church. This happened at the Council of Ferrara-Florence in the middle of the 15th century. Afterwards, the union was repudiated by the Local Orthodox Churches and later by Constantinople, too. Therefore, we cannot exclude a possibility that Constantinople might unilaterally make some sort of agreements with the Roman Catholic or any other Church. All the more so that the Patriarch of Constantinople has been speaking recently about his special prerogatives, of which we knew nothing but which allegedly were granted to him by the apostles, and which he is not going to discuss.

Such kind of theology had already caused the regrettable developments in Ukraine, when unilaterally, without consulting with the Local Churches and against their will, Patriarch of Constantinople committed an anti-canonical act that provoked schism in the Orthodox world. It is possible to expect the schism of world Orthodoxy to grow deeper and deeper, if the Patriarch of Constantinople .continues to single himself out more and more and raise himself further and further to the height of the “special rights and privileges” he has ascribed to himself.

As to the visit of the delegation fr om Constantinople to Vatican, one should know that such visits take place every year. On the feast of Ss Apostles Peter and Paul (according to the Western calendar), a delegation fr om the Patriarchate of Constantinople visits Rome and meets with the Pope. Sometimes the Patriarch leads the delegation, sometimes one of the eldest metropolitans of the See of Constantinople.

In his relations with the Roman Catholic Church the Patriarch of Constantinople positions himself as the head of the entire Orthodox Church. This is a great problem for the Orthodox-Roman Catholic dialogue especially now that the unity in Eucharist has been broken within the Orthodox Church. Today the Patriarch of Constantinople is not eligible to represent either the Russian Orthodox Church, which has ceased commemorating him according to diptychs, or other Orthodox Churches which disagree with his policy. He can represent only himself, the Church of Constantinople. Probably, he can also represent those Churches which will authorize him to do so, but this will not be a majority of the Orthodox faithful, but less than a half of them, just a small part of them. This is one problem.

Another problem is caused by the fact that in the recent years the Patriarch of Constantinople has been trying to use this dialogue to boost up his primacy in the Orthodox Church, which is in fact nothing more that the primacy of honour but which he wants to turn into a semblance of papal authority in the Roman Catholic Church. Orthodoxy has never had one Pope, one single supreme head for al Orthodox Churches. This new teaching that is now actively propagated by Constantinople has brought about schism and arouses disapproval in the Local Orthodox Churches. It is the reason why the Orthodox-

Roman Catholic dialogue has reached a deadlock.

E.Gracheva: Your Eminence, Belarus President Aleksandr Lukashenko has made a loud statement, saying: “The opponents of the Belarusian state are taking concrete steps towards the autocephaly of the Belarusian Orthodox Church.” Are these fears justified and is there a chance that events in Belarus might develop under the Ukrainian scenario of schism?

Metropolitan Hilarion: These fears are justified, but a chance that events in Belarus will develop according to the Ukrainian scenario is not great – thank God, because neither the faithful, nor hierarchs and clergy of the Belarusian Church support an idea of the autocephalous Church.

Certainly, the forces involved in destabilizing political situation have understood that the church factor might play not the least role, and will be interested in promoting an idea of the Belarusian autocephaly. There are some schismatic structures not in the foreground yet. These are small groups of people who are calling themselves “the Belarusian autocephalous church.” Mostly, these people are to be found outside the borders of Belarus – in the USA and other countries. Yet we cannot exclude an opportunity that the forces which are aiming to divide the Russian Orthodox Church and which have conspicuously shown themselves in Ukraine, could wish to show their worth in Belarus, too.

E.Gracheva:Rather interesting events are taking place in Ukraine. I do not know in which language sermons are delivered at divine services in a new uncanonical Orthodox church of Ukraine, but some priests are trying to attract attention to themselves in a different language. Recently, a “priest” of this church speaking at the concert given for the 25th anniversary of Ukraine’s independence, called the parishioners of churches belonging to the Moscow Patriarchate (excuse me, I quote him) pieces of shit. Do you have an answer to him and other priests using such lexis?

Metropolitan Hilarion: Our official answer is very simple: these people are not priests, but laypersons who got into priestly vestments and call themselves priests. There are those among them who proclaimed themselves bishops and metropolitans, but they have no canonical ordination. Therefore they are not priests, but impostors who illegally appropriated holy orders, and Constantinople has legitimized them. From Constantinople’s viewpoint, the person who said those words is a priest. I believe that since Constantinople is now the highest judge in this so-called church – OCU, Constantinople must deal with all that is happening there. It has nothing to do with us, and nothing to do with canonical Orthodox Christianity. I repeat: this person is not a priest at all.

Ekaterina Gracheva: Now, Vladyka, let us move on to other topics. Last week the Parliament of France passed a law on bioethics granting the right to unmarried women and to women of lesbian couples to get pregnant via in vitro fertilization (IVF). Earlier, the Fifth Republic’s law had provided the

IVF right only for heterosexual couples, both married and not. If, after all, a similar law comes out in a country, as it did in France, which is the lesser of the evils in your opinion: when a child is born to a male couple of gays with the help of a surrogate mother and has two fathers, or when one woman of a lesbian couple becomes a biological mother and the child gets two mothers?

Metropolitan Hilarion: I cannot say which of the evils is the lesser in so much as the Orthodox Church cannot approve this kind of innovations in any form or status. Our position is based on the traditional perception of family as it is reflected in the Holy Scriptures and in the centuries-long Church Tradition. We believe that children should have both father and mother. If a family breaks up because of a tragedy or divorce, the children are brought up by one of the parents. In case both parents perish their children could be adopted. This is the traditional way of bringing up children.

In principle, the Orthodox Church is not against biotechnology as such, neither is it against the development and application of new methods of treating the infertility. Our attitude to the IVF is now a point of discussion within the Orthodox Church. At one of our earlier talks in your programme I said that we had not put an end to this discussion. We, in our Church, have set up a special commission to deal with the problems of bioethics. We have invited to work in this commission not only clergymen and our laypersons who are interested in IVF problems or are professionally working in this field, but also people from outside the Church who are directly involved in the solution of bioethical problems. So, this is indeed a commission of highly qualified specialists well versed in this subject. I hope this commission will include among the problems of its consideration those raised in “The Fundamentals of Social Concept,” a document adopted in 2000, along with currently emerging ones, because bioethics is a developing area of study demanding more and more new and upd ated answers from the Church.

Besides, I would like to underline that the Church has never imposed its viewpoints on anyone. We just express our opinion which bears authority to those who trust the Church, but for those who do not and who do not belong to the Church, our opinion may be of no interest at all.

Ekaterina Gracheva: Vladyka, now is busy time for school leavers and university enrollees. Entrance contests at higher educational institutions are on the go; the Unified State Exam (USE) is left behind. Every year the Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VCIOM) studies if the opinion of Russians, parents and students, on the Unified State Exam has changed and how. It is interesting that since the COVID pandemic broke out more than half of Russians – 55% – have been firmly insistent on the change of the USE system, while 19% have been adhering to the opinion that it should be abolished as such. What is your attitude to this system? How does it change from year to year? What changes, if any, have you noticed? And generally, how, if at all, should the final exams at the secondary schools be changed, considering the experience of the pandemic and that of the on-line education that we have acquired?

Metropolitan Hilarion: My attitude to the Unified State Exam system is dual. On the one hand, this system makes it possible to check up the knowledge of school leavers in a situation when they do not already belong to the school wh ere they studied and wh ere some special privileged conditions could have been created for them, but when they have not yet entered the higher school they have chosen, wh ere, otherwise, privileges also could have been given to a concrete applicant or applicants, in whom this school might be interested. On the other hand, however, the mode of the organization and conduction of the USE exams creates a lot of inconveniencies for children and their parents. I have regular contacts with families, both with parents and children, and I can say that so far I have not heard a single positive reaction to the USE.

Here is a real-life situation, for example. Last year one boy was excellently prepared for the Unified States Exam. He had passed all pre-USE tests with high marks. He had studied with tutors intending to enter a prestigious university, but unfortunately, shortly before the exams, he fell ill with COVID and was taken to hospital. When, after a three-week medical treatment, he was out of hospital, the exams were over, and taking them later was not possible. In the result, the boy has lost one whole year.

I think it would be only to general advantage, if the USE system were more flexible and took into consideration possibilities and interests of children and at the same time were not so strictly limited to a fixed period of time. This would offer a possibility to pass these exams at some other time for those who were unable for this or that reason – at least only because of illness – to be ready to take them at the se t-up time

Ekaterina Gracheva: Thank you very much, Vladyka, for this interesting conversation.

Metropolitan Hilarion: Thank you, Ekaterina.

During the second part of the talk Metropolitan Hilarion answered questions of the TV viewers sent to the website of the Church and the World program.

Question: Vladyka Hilarion, one question has been bothering me for a long time. I want to pray as is right according to the rules – in the morning and in the evening. But I have a poor health and have to take a lot of medicine. Please advise me what to do, tell me in what degree taking medicine and prayer agree with the canons of our Church?

Metropolitan Hilarion: As a matter of fact, I don't think that taking medicine is bound up with prayer in any way. You may begin your day and end it earlier or later, in this or that manner; likewise, you may pray before or after taking medicine, or at the same time when you take it. If, for example, you are

unable for health reasons to pray standing in front of the icons, sit down and do it sitting. If it is impossible for you to pray sitting because your illness keeps you to bed, pray in a lying position. The most important thing in prayer is not the outer pose of worshippers, but the inner disposition of their hearts. The Lord does not care in what pose those appealing to him are standing; He is not looking at the worshippers' legs and hands, but at their hearts. Of course, there are traditionally accepted norms of a proper pose and behavior during the prayer, but they concern only healthy people. People constrained by medical indications may pray in any position. Your heart must be with God and your mind directed up to God is what matters in the first place.

You may pray using a prayer book or your own words. If for some reasons using a prayer book becomes impossible, pray in your own words. Talk with God just as you are talking with people close to you. God is sure to hear you and come to your help.

Question: Vladyka, how can I come to belief in God, if all events happening in my life have been witnessing that there is no God? God doesn't make Himself evident in any way. He doesn't help me; I cope with all my problems by myself.

Metropolitan Hilarion: I think you are wrong here. It is not God who does not make Himself evident, but you do not see His involvement in your life. If it had not been God's will you would have not come to this world. If it had not been the will of God you would have not lived up to your present age. If it seems to you that you are solving all your problems by yourself, it is only your wishful thinking, because you would have never overcome your problems, if God had not provided you with necessary resources, material, physical, or spiritual. God is unnoticed only to those people who, for some reasons, are unable to identify God's active presence in their life.

We take a lot of things for granted. For example, it seems to some people that being healthy and reaching a certain age in life is a reality occurring of its own accord. Some people even ascribe these phenomena to their own gains. But look around: how many there are people, sick, ailing, how many of them have not lived to be as old as you. This fact alone is a sufficient reason to thank God.

Question: Your Eminence, how should one understand the following words from the Gospel: "So be wise as serpents and harmless as doves" (Mt. 10:16)? Why did the Lord speak in parables?

Metropolitan Hilarion: There are two questions here. One is about a concrete phrase said by the Saviour and the second – about why at all the Lord chose to speak in parables.

An answer to the first question could be this. The words "be wise as serpents" advise people to be reasonable assessing the situation around. "Be harmless as doves" implies that an absolutely sound

and adequate thinking can be easily combined with our being open-minded and guileless, as well as with our following the moral commandments given to us by the Lord Jesus Christ. In other words, the Lord calls upon us to assess soberly the developments taking place around us and at the same time observe the moral norms of His commandments.

As for the second question, there are several different answers. In the scientific literature, for example, there is a hypothesis according to which He spoke in parables to make His teaching easy to understand. However, another hypothesis asserts that He used parables to make the process of comprehending His teaching a more time-consuming brainwork.

I am inclined to identify with the second view. I think that a parable is a unique method for communicating the teaching, urging its recipient to respond. Different people listening to a parable hear it in their own individual way, finding in it something identical with their own individual selves. Moreover, one and the same person at different stages of his or her spiritual development might at every new stage returning to the earlier-heard parable and find something new.

This is why the parables of the Lord Jesus Christ never become outdated. They were heard and read two thousand years ago; they are being heard and read today, remaining as relevant as ever before. But this is not the main reason why it is so. First of all, it is because through these parables God Himself is talking with us.

After all, we ought to remember the most important thing: the Lord Jesus Christ was not just a teacher of morality, nor someone who used to give commandments. He was the Incarnate God talking to people. Whenever we open the Gospel and try to hear out, read out and think out His words, it is the time when we are being addressed not by a common person but God Himself. Accordingly, when we are praying we are responding to what we hear from Him. He addresses us with the Holy Scriptures – we respond to Him with a prayer.

I would like to conclude this program with the words of St Paul from his First Epistle to the Thessalonians: “Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”(1 Thess.5:18)

I wish all good things to you. Take care of yourselves, and of your loved ones, and May the Lord keep safe you all.

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