



Bishop Victor of Baryshev: The visit of the Patriarch of Constantinople to Ukraine will cause suffering to millions of Orthodox Ukrainians



The UOC Information-Education Department has published the translated interview of the head of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Representation to European international organizations, Bishop Victor of Baryshev, to news-politics.com.

- Your Eminence! Recently on the Day of the Baptism of Rus we watched and read that in the procession with the cross in Kiev had participated more than 300.000 believers. Please, share your emotions with us. After all, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church is the largest confession in Ukraine?

According to our calculations, there were about 350,000 participants in the Great Cross Procession in Kyiv this year. It is the biggest number of participants for the entire time of processions with the cross in Ukraine in general, and in Kyiv in particular. It's noteworthy that the Great Cross Procession was held on Tuesday, July 27, which means that a lot of Orthodox believers of our Church could not join it because of the working day. In addition, a fairly large number of believers were unable to get to Kyiv either because of financial difficulties or because of the lack of transport. Let me underscore that the overwhelming majority of believers traveled to the capital of Ukraine to participate in the procession with the cross on their own: people came by trains, electric trains, private cars or buses. Therefore, those who came to Kyiv are the people who really had a strong wish to walk along the streets of the capital of Ukraine with a prayer for peace in the country, unity and a peaceful life for the Church.

- You might be wondering – why did they do it? What exactly prompted them to attend such an extremely difficult, both physically and financially, event?

- In fact, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church has been living in rather complicated circumstances for the past 7 years. During the presidency of Petro Poroshenko, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church lost several hundred temples, which were taken away from it illegally and forcefully by representatives of the “Orthodox Church of Ukraine”. In addition, the Verkhovna Rada adopted several anti-church laws that currently simplify the “transitions”, as are called by the “OCU”, which are actually raider seizures of our temples. With the change of power, the situation has somewhat changed, the tension has partially diminished, but no tangible changes have taken place so far. All this served as one of the reasons for our faithful people to stop being inactive and to come out in defense of their Church – first of all, the prayerful, conciliar defense. The procession with the cross is an effective manifestation of the prayerful impulse of the believing community.

But the root cause is otherwise. The Orthodox people of Ukraine, without delving into theological subtleties, feel with their heart and soul the grace-filled presence of the Holy Spirit precisely in the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. One can rant a lot about canonicity, about the historical conditions of the Church’s existence, about some political and other things in order to prove the presence of the Divine grace, but all this will be only dry external argumentation that does not touch human hearts. Instead, one can simply live the life of the Church, participate in Her Sacraments, be a faithful child of the Church and not only understand, but also accept the gifts of grace sent by God. In this sense, it is impossible to deceive or mislead a person. What is the evidence for this? - the Vladimir Hill in Kyiv and city streets, overcrowded with people on July 27. This is exactly the evidence of the trust the believing people of our country have in the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Without a doubt, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church is the largest religious denomination in Ukraine, and no opinion polls are needed to understand this fact. It is obvious that after the Feast of Prince Vladimir and the Baptism of Rus’, only a blind person or an outright liar can try to convince the public that most believers in Ukraine support some other confession, not the UOC. No other religious organization in the country is capable of gathering as many people on the streets of the capital as the cross walkers who came out in support of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church given the harsh environment we are living in.

You are asking what emotions I had during the Great Cross Procession. Incredible joy, spiritual uplift, a sense of the presence of the grace of God. It is also the awareness of our unity. True, we are united in Christ when we partake of the Eucharist. But we are also one when we share our prayer. After all, the Lord Himself said, “For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them”, while there were several hundred thousand of us! The Great Procession with the cross became a visible testimony of our unity and the triumph of our faith.

- Tell us about the situation in Ukraine so far. Has it been improved over the last two years? What about the attacks on the believers and the churches?

- As I mentioned above, the situation has hardly changed. Immediately after Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople granted the Tomos of Autocephaly to the two schismatic structures of our country, during the first few months our believers faced a surge of unprecedented pressure on the Church. The seizures of temples or attempted seizures were often accompanied by acts of vandalism and physical violence by adherents of the “OCU”. Doors were broken in our temples; there were even cases when the Lord’s Table and the Holy Gifts were thrown out into the street. On several occasions, the believers of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church including elders were severely beaten up. Furthermore, all the offences were committed with the connivance or tacit consent of the previous government.

Since Vladimir Zelensky came to power, the situation has become somewhat different. In particular, there is an attempt to maintain certain parity at the level of the central government. At least it was so until Zelensky invited Patriarch Bartholomew to Ukraine. At the level of local authorities, unfortunately,

the issues have not gone away. In fact, our President was able to maintain neutrality for a long time, which is now upset to some extent in favor of the "OCU". However, this is an unwinnable position, as the results of the previous President Poroshenko's governance have shown. I just want to remind you that in the history of the Church, the support of breakaway structures contrary to the age-old church canons has never led to anything good. The war against the Church is not only the fight against God and one's own salvation, but also the end of one's political career and stable life. The Holy Scripture justly tells us to give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.

- The Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew is going to visit Kiev during August. Will it be a visit with positive results after all these problems that his decision for the 'Tomos' caused two years ago?

- As far as we know from the media, Patriarch Bartholomew is indeed going to come to Ukraine on an official visit. In view of all the developments in the church life of our country, millions of believers of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church oppose the visit of the head of the Church of Constantinople to Ukraine. Why? Because our believers have learnt the hard way and hence they know that this visit will cause suffering to millions of Orthodox Ukrainians. Concerns have been repeatedly expressed that after the arrival of the Patriarch of Constantinople, we may see a change in the political vector and a return to the course that the previous government of the country embarked on until 2019. This means that the number of raider seizures of our temples may significantly increase alongside the level of violence against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. After all, Patriarch Bartholomew cannot but understand that his arrival in Ukraine will be taken by the nationalist radical forces as a "wake-up call". Therefore, and if he speaks of love for all Ukrainians, then he should refrain from the planned visit.

On the other hand, the head of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, as the first among equal in honor bishops of the Universal Orthodox Church, could publicly condemn acts of violence against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, call on his spiritual children from the 'OCU' to stop the vicious practice of seizing churches, beating up the Ukrainian Orthodox Church faithful, to halt the purposeful flow of insults, slander and malice directed at our Church – but he never did this.

Naturally, his arrival under such circumstances cannot evoke approval from millions of believers in our Church. It is as if the Pope was going to come to Ukraine in the early 90s of the last century, when the Uniates seized our Orthodox churches in Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk, Lutsk, Ternopil (on the territory of western Ukraine) daily and everywhere. What would be a response of the believers who were affected by those seizures and remained on the street outside the churches taken away from them, which they, their grandfathers and great-grandfathers had built? Of course, it would be negative – both in the 90s and now.

These are the lingering sentiments of our flock regarding the visit of Patriarch Bartholomew, which are a backlash against his actions in Ukraine. Therefore, we still hope that having carefully studied the real, rather than the virtual situation in Ukraine, the head of the Church of Constantinople will make a sensible decision so as not to exacerbate the existing problems in the religious life of our country.