Metropolitan Hilarion: To reveal Christ to people is our most important missionary task



Interview of Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, head of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate to Italian Corriere della Sera *daily.*

- **Your Eminence, in the preface to your book about Fyodor Dostoevsky, you write about the Russian author as an apostle and prophet. In your opinion, is there in Dostoevsky's works anything special that can help the Orthodox and Catholics come closer together?**

- I think Dostoevsky's value for us, Christians, lies in his continued attempts to lead the reader of his

works to Christ. I will give you an example. Recently I visited one of the Moscow universities. There were a few hundreds of professors and students. I asked, “Who of you have read Dostoevsky?” All to the last one raised hands. Then I asked, “And who of you has read the Gospel?” About a quarter of the audience raised hands.

Many people in the world get to know Russia, Orthodoxy, Russian culture fr om Dostoevsky’s works - he is translated into all the tongues that have written language. Did Dostoevsky wished it or not but he has become an apostle of Christ. He bore witness to Christ even in the Soviet time when religious literature was prohibited in the USSR. He can also be called a prophet because he warned against coming disasters. He was the only cultural worker who discerned in the socialist revolutionary ideology its demonic nature. Many of our people thought that socialism comes to replace capitalism, while Dostoevsky showed socialism comes to replace Christianity. He revealed the anti-Christian and demonic essence of that ideology which promised people happiness without God. He said it is impossible to build happiness apart from God, and he saw in the person of Jesus Christ the greatest moral example for the whole humanity.

In his novels, Dostoevsky sought to bring the reader closer not just to the understanding of Christ’s teaching but also to the understanding of His personality. And he did it by means inherent in him alone, creating Christ-like characters, such as Prince Myshkin in *Idiot*, Starets Zosima and Alyosha Karamazov in *The Karamazov Brothers,* Tikhon in *The Devils*, and certainly Christ in *The Grand Inquisitor*.

- Is it to say that this address to the personality of Christ, to the sources of Christianity, to the epoch of the undivided Church can become a distinctive platform for uniting Orthodox Christians and Catholics?

- I think it is the most important and the most precious thing of what we have is Christ. I always stress that the most important thing in Christianity is not the teaching of Christ but the personality of Christ. Christ has left to us not just a teaching, not just an amount of some commandments - He has left Himself to us. He is present in His Church. He, as we believe, is the Celebrant of the Eucharist. He offers Himself to us in the communion of the Body and Blood of Christ.

I have spoken about it recently at the Eucharistic Congress of the Catholic Church in Budapest. The Orthodox and the Catholics are not united in the Eucharist but united in their understanding of the Eucharist. Primarily in the understanding that in the Eucharistic bread and vine after their consecration we have the real, not symbolic, Body of Christ and Blood of Christ.

- Five years have passed since the historic meeting of the Pope of Rome and the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia in Havana. Not long ago, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, answering questions from journalists, stated that at present there are no conditions for Pope Francis to make a visit to Russia. What does prevent the realisation of such a visit or at least the organization of a new meeting of the Pope and the Patriarch?

- It is important to separate the two topics: a visit of the Pope to Russia and a meeting of the Pope and the Patriarch. As to the first topic, I share the opinion of Cardinal Parolin that the conditions for such a visit are absent at present. I do not think that I should voice the reasons for which this visit does not appear possible at present; these are well known to the both sides. Therefore, at present such a visit does not stand on the agenda of our bilateral relations.

However, it does not mean at all that we should not develop these relations. On the contrary, we are developing them, and a new impetus to it was given by the Havana Meeting of Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill. Here I come to an answer to the question asked very often nowadays: when will the next meeting of the Pope and the Patriarch take place? The Havana Meeting was announced about a week before it took place. I think, the next meeting too, when we shall have it prepared, will be announced approximately a week before it. We will hardly announce it a month or several months before.

- Is that to say that we can hope that the meeting will take place and that theoretically it is possible?

- I think the meeting will take place. But I repeat, we will not announce it beforehand. Indeed, we have always stressed that what is important for us is not the fact of a meeting but its results. The previous meeting, in our view, was very effective.

I would like to point out a few aspects of the previous meeting, which have a special importance for our Church. First, it is very important for us that the Pope and the Patriarch confirmed their commitment to the defence of the rights of persecuted Christians in the Middle East and in other regions wh ere Christians are subjected to persecution. Of course, both the Pope and the Patriarch speak about it in their addresses, but it is very important that they state this together.

Secondly, it would be very important for us that the Pope and the Patriarch should state together that the *unia* is not a path to unity. We do not perceive *unia* at all as a bridge between the Christian East and West but on the contrary, as an obstacle to dialogue. We can very clearly see it from the statements of representatives of the Catholic Church in Ukraine. And it is not accidental that the Ukrainian Greek Catholics were very much discontented with the meeting of the Pope and the Patriarch and with the words coming from their mouths.

The joint declaration summing up the meeting between Pope Francis of Rome and Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia contained a number of other very important topics. And to this day, we have a vast space for work in the direction set by the Pope and the Patriarch in Havana.

However, life marches on. There are new challenges demanding new meetings and new joint statements.

- **After the Havana Meeting, you kept saying that though theological dialogue has its importance but what is important in the first place is cooperation on social issues. A statement of the same kind was made by Pope Francis. You have just returned from the first part of the Summit preceding the 26th Session of the UN Climate Change Conference. In your opinion, could ecological problems become one of the issues on which cooperation is**

necessary in the first place?

- Certainly, the ecological problems is one of the areas in which we should intensify our cooperation. We all are in the same boat. We have one common home. If ices are melt and various territories begin to be flooded, then water will not ask whether you are an Orthodox or a Catholic, as both will be drowned, and Muslims, Judaists and atheists will together with them. Therefore, we have to discuss the problem of the climate change regardless of our difference in faith.

Some would ask, “How can you change anything here?” Definitely, we cannot change it on our own. But we can address political leaders, state leaders with an appeal to make their political decisions taking into account the coming ecological catastrophe. May be, in this way by joint efforts we will be able to prevent it.

- The Synod of Bishops will soon be opened in the Vatican. In this connection, Pope Francis, many cardinals and bishops say that Christians once again have found themselves in a heathen world, and we will have to act like apostles, to address actually the heathen public. Do you share this opinion, what can you say about it?

- I think that on the one hand we live in an epoch when actually no obstacles arise for our Christian mission, at least in the territories that traditionally belong to the Christian cultural habitat. It concerns Russia and a whole number of other countries, which used to be part of the Soviet Union.

For 70 years we have lived in a situation when the Church was actually prohibited, when she could not be engaged in either missionary, or educational or charitable work. But for over 30 years now, we have lived in an completely different situation. I would say that the conditions in which we live in the post-Soviet space are largely unique.

I continually hear from my colleagues from western countries about a crisis of vocations, about a decrease in the number of believers. I hear about closing churches to be reshaped as secular institutions or even sold as worship facilities to different confessions. In our country, thank God, no such things happen. On the contrary, we open about a thousand new churches annually. For the last 30 years, we have opened almost one thousand new monasteries. We still have hundreds and thousands of young people who study theology.

However, it does not mean that we have succeeded in the missionary work so much that we can rest on our laurels. Much has been done but we are to do even more. For instance, in Russia, we have many of those who were baptized Orthodox Christians, but they have a poor understanding of what Orthodoxy is about. I think, in the audience about which I spoke in the beginning of this interview, there likely were 90 per cent of baptized people. Only a quarter of them, as it turned out, read the Gospel. And it means that before us is a vast space for educational work. These people are not heathens. They believe to be Orthodox Christians but if even they did not read the Gospel then it is rather a nominal Orthodoxy then the real one.

To reduce the gap between nominal and real Christianity is our main task today. To reveal Christ to people, to show why Christ is important for them is our priority and most important task.

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