The creation of a Patriarchal exarchate in Africa. An interview with the metropolitan of Klin Leonid

On 29th December 2021 the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church made public its epochal decision on the creation of the Patriarchal exarchate of Africa. It received into its ranks more than a hundred priests of the Greek Orthodox Church of Alexandria who wished to leave it after its head Patriarch Theodore recognized the Ukrainian schismatics. The new exarchate is headed by the metropolitan of Klin Leonid (Gorbachev). In an exclusive interview with RIA-Novosti, he spoke of the foreseeable plans of the Church in Africa: the future of the clergy and parishioners, the construction of cathedral churches and relations with the Patriarchate of Alexandria.

Metropolitan Leonid, do you plan on visiting Africa in the near future in order to organize the affairs of the exarchate?

I am planning a pastoral visit to Africa. At present, it is impossible to visit a number of countries as a result of the restrictions brought on by the pandemic. Nevertheless, the structure of the exarchate will develop, human resources will be needed and staffing the exarchate is at present one of our top priorities. The nucleus of the exarchate will be formed in Moscow. It is an absolutely new continent-wide powerful structure which requires scrupulous, detailed study and a development plan.

The hundred and two priests of the Church of Alexandria who have gone over to the Russia
Church – have they done so together with their parishes or not?

Yes, they have gone over with their parishes and flock. According to our prognosis, this is only the beginning.

Where will the seat of the new exarchate be located and will new cathedral churches be built in Africa, for example, in Cairo?

His Holiness Patriarch Kirill has set aside for the administrative needs of the exarchate the metochion of the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, which houses the Church of All Saints ‘na Kulishkakh’ in the city of Moscow. As required, there will be built churches of the Russia Orthodox Church in African countries. The question of allotting land in Cairo for the construction there of a cathedral church is being decided. In Johannesburg – the centre of the South African diocese – a parish of the Russian Orthodox Church has been active since 1999. Apart from a church building, the assembly of buildings includes additional premises for the needs of the parish. This is a perfect material foundation for the setting up there of a diocesan centre with a cathedral church.

How will the future look for our Church in Africa after the Synod’s decisions?

This is, in our view, a historical step. The Russian Orthodox Church will acquire a different status and is assuming the responsibility laid upon on her with regard to this epochal event. We are not prepared to reconcile ourselves with injustice and the trampling down of the canons of the Church, no matter who does this. Moreover, the Russian Orthodox Church has always treated with concern and attention the position of Christian minorities throughout the world, and Africa is no exception. We have spoken about this wherever possible. The rights of Christians should in no way be violated, and we are doing all we can from our side to protect and observe them.

As there have been organized two dioceses within the exarchate, will the local priests who have gone over to the Russian Church be able to become bishops within them?

As has already been remarked, the issue of staffing is one of the most important. We do not exclude the possibility of expanding the structure of the exarchate if necessity dictates. The question of the possibility of forming other dioceses and the appointment to them of bishops from among both the Russian and the African clergy may be put to the Holy Synod for examination. We also do not exclude the possibility of some of the bishops of the Patriarchate of Alexandria declaring their intention to transfer to the bosom of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Does Your Eminence have ideas on how the leadership and clergy of the Church of Alexandria may react to the creation of the exarchate as it has appeared on their canonical territory?

After the anti-canonical, perfidious and autocratic decision of the Primate of the Greek Orthodox Church of Alexandria to recognize the schismatic grouping of the so-called ‘Orthodox Church of Ukraine’ we maintained a long pause, expecting the hierarchy of the Orthodox Church of Alexandria to realize the depths and tragic and irrevocable nature of their error, but this did not happen. No Synod was called at which its members could express their opinion on the autocratic decision of Patriarch Theodore, whether to support it or reject it. We waited two years, more than was possible. Now, the reaction of the leadership of the Greek Orthodox Church of Alexandria has ceased to be an issue for us.

The figures speak for themselves regarding the reaction of the clergy. A hundred and two members of the clergy have already applied to be received under the omophorion of the Russian Orthodox Church.
This is quite a high percentage of the general number of clergy. Some have been waiting for this since 2019. We are expecting the number of applications to increase.