His Holiness Patriarch Kirill meets with WCC acting general secretary Archpriest Ioan Sauca



On October 17, 2022, His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia met with Archpriest Ioan Sauca, acting general secretary of the World Council of Churches.

Attending the meeting that took place at the Patriarchal Residence in St Daniel's Monastery in Moscow, were also Metropolitan Anthony of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations; Archimandrite Philaret (Bulekov), DECR vice-chairman; Archpriest Mikhail Gundyaev, representative of the Moscow Patriarchate to the World Council of Churches and international organisations in Geneva; Hieromonk Stefan (Igumnov), DECR secretary for inter-Christian relations; and Rev. Benjamin Simon, Program Executive for Church Relations of the WCC.

Greeting the guest, His Holiness said, in particular, "I appreciate that you have come to Russia in these trying times in order to meet with me and my brothers and talk about the situation unfolding in international relations. Naturally, this situation affects inter-church relations as well."

Having emphasized an important role of the World Council of Churches in overcoming various problems arising in the relationships between the nations, Patriarch Kirill shared with Fr Ioan Sauca his recollections of the time when he had served as representative of the Moscow Patriarchate to the WCC in Geneva in 1971-1974. “I remember great many political crises that caused serious troubles for the inter-Christian movement, and then challenges would be posed to the very fact of the WCC existence,” His Holiness continued, “Yet, we would always find a way out and help the Churches engage in the process of peace-making.”

The current difficult situation in the world takes its toll on inter-church relations, His Holiness noted and mentioned that the COVID-19 pandemic with its wide range of problems was an aggravating factor affecting the life of people and Churches likewise. “I appreciate that in these trying times the World Council of Churches is up to the tasks and challenges facing it,” he added.

Patriarch Kirill expressed his high opinion of the 11th General Assembly of the World Council of Churches held in Karlsruhe, Germany, on August 31 – September 8. “There were challenges and critical issues, one of them pertaining to the Russian Orthodox Church. Demands were heard that the Russian Church should be expelled from the World Council of Churches. However, nothing of the sort occurred during the Assembly,” His Holiness Patriarch Kirill said.

“We all are going through difficult, I would say, critical times because of the certain conflicts, including the one concerning Ukraine,” the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church said. As he pointed out, the majority of onlookers have just noticed the existing problems, while in fact the crisis began as far back as 2014. “Eight years ago there were first Ukrainian shellings of Donbass. Destroyed houses, heavy casualties – that’s the reality. More than 2 million refugees from that area found refuge in Russia. Personally, I wrote three letters during those years to the political and religious authorities of the world, including WCC, and asked to intervene that the problems be solved through dialogue and mediation and to avoid killings and destructions. I had no concrete answers and such requests were met with total silence. Yet, my hope was and still is that as Churches we have to go beyond the logic and interest of the politicians and look for just peace”.

The Patriarch emphasized that in the current difficult situation Donbass and other areas of conflict require particular attention. “It is a matter of overriding importance that no more blood be shed, no more buildings and infrastructure be destroyed, and no more people suffer. Therefore, we are greatly interested in drawing our ecumenical partners’ unbiased attention to the situation in Donbass,” His Holiness noted.

He mentioned the visit that the delegation of the World Council of Churches and ACT Alliance

undertook to the Dioceses of Rostov-on-Don and Shakhty in May to learn more about the relief efforts of the Russian Orthodox Church. “I hope that tomorrow you will visit our humanitarian aid headquarters. It operates in Moscow; yet the core aspect of its work is providing actual support to the people affected by the conflict,” His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia continued.

“The work our humanitarian headquarters and the Russian Church in general carry out through official channels is just a small part of the actual aid coming from Orthodox Christians in Russia,” His Holiness said, “There are many private, parochial, youth initiatives. Unofficially, even without the support from higher church authorities, people go there to render assistance and share their resources with those in need. A portion of this work finds its way to the official website of the Moscow Patriarchate. What we have officially managed to collect and send as humanitarian aid amounts to millions of roubles and thousands of tons of foodstuffs and other necessities.”

Archpriest Ioan Sauca thanked the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church for the meeting and said, in particular, “The members of our fellowship are looking with great interest and hope to this visit. We came here with a mandate from the Central Committee. This June, when we were preparing for the Assembly, I was asked to visit our member Churches with bleeding wounds from Middle East: Syria, Lebanon, Israel and Palestine and then from Ukraine, and now we have come to Russia. You are aware of the concerns that member Churches of the WCC have with regard to the war between Russia and Ukraine and of our statements that condemn the war and violence which we made in our governing bodies – the statements which were elaborated with the participation of delegates from the Russian Orthodox Church. I am also grateful for our correspondence, for your response to our letters. The reason for coming here is to see what we can do together to build bridges of peace and reconciliation and stop the bloodshed and the danger of nuclear conflagration.”

Having mentioned the situation in Donbass – the topic which His Holiness Patriarch Kirill also raised during the meeting – the WCC acting general secretary said, “I am aware of the letters which you sent from 2014 to 2020 to the leaders of the world, drawing their attention to the situation and asking for dialogue. The problem is that people forgot about it or never knew about it. I think it would very helpful now to make the same statement, saying what you told us: stop the bloodshed, stop the killing, stop the destruction of infrastructure, look for peace and reconciliation. This will help greatly the world and the Orthodox Church as well” and will make it clear what is your personal position to the war.”

Fr Ioan Sauca also made reference to the appeals that had come from a number of the WCC member Churches asking to expel the Russian Orthodox Church. “When such a proposal was brought for vote, all Central Committee members, in unanimity, voted to keep the Russian Orthodox Church in the fellowship of WCC but to continue the dialogue in particular on the theological argumentation and support of the war which, for some people, were made public in some of Your sermons and speeches”.

As Patriarch Kirill seemed not to be aware what we speak about, the members of the Russian delegation in the meeting explained that some people just quote certain phrases from Patriarch Kirill's homilies, failing to give full quotations from his speeches and put them in context and thus using them to engineer accusations against the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church.

At the same time, according to Archpriest Ioan Sauca, in the current situation it is important to clarify what is the Orthodox theological understanding of such phenomenon as war. He expressed his belief that it would be beneficial for inter-church relations today if His Holiness Patriarch Kirill could offer his insight into the topic, dwelling, in particular, on what may be regarded as a holy war from the theological point of view, what reasons there might be for people to get involved in hostilities, and what is the importance of self-sacrifice in battle.

Addressing His Holiness Patriarch Kirill, the WCC acting general secretary added, "We value the Russian Orthodox Church. It is one of the biggest Churches of the WCC. And all of us would like to see that the Russian Orthodox Church continue to be a part of it because your contribution over the years was very important for the ecumenical movement and also for the Orthodox unity." He noted that the WCC can be a very good platform for dialogue between Orthodox Christians as well.

His Holiness Patriarch Kirill thanked the guest for emphasizing a significant role of Orthodoxy in inter-Christian movement.

As His Holiness noted, he first took part in the work of the World Council of Churches in 1968, at the General Assembly in Uppsala, Sweden. "Back then, I was the youngest member of the Assembly, 21 years old," Patriarch Kirill said. "The times we live in today are very difficult; yet these difficulties do not come from the Churches, but from the political context, and this context constitutes an extreme danger today," he continued, "We cannot even imagine how close at hand is a dangerous turn in the relationships between peoples. Therefore, the Churches today must not add fuel to the fire. On the contrary, we must do everything within our power to put out the fire. In this regard, the World Council of Churches and the inter-Christian movement in general have a very important function. In my opinion, the WCC today has taken the only proper position – active, but neutral – taking no political sides in this conflict. The Churches by nature have a peace-making potential. And if a Church starts waving a flag of war and calling for confrontation, it acts against its nature."

"In my view, the international crisis unfolding today is dangerous, but no more so than many other crises we went through in the past. The Churches have experience in going through the crises together. I believe that through dialogue, in brotherhood and cooperation we should exert positive influence on the political situation," His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia said, "May God help that the Christian Churches which cooperated with each other in past, may today as well continue to bear their

joint witness before the world, resisting the temptation to become a part of some political force.”

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