Metropolitan Hilarion of Budapest and Hungary: Constantinople's claims are getting bolder



*The Council of Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church has approved a document of almost 40 pages entitled "On the Distortion of the Orthodox Teaching About the Church in the Acts of the Hierarchy of the Patriarchate of Constantinople and the Speeches of its Representatives" Metropolitan Hilarion of Budapest and Hungary, Chairman of the Synodal Biblical and Theological Commission, gave an interview to **RIA Novosti** where he spoke about the purpose, core and status of this document, about the claims of Constantinople to authority outside of its own Local Church and their consequences, about other topical issues considered by the bishops, about the life and development of the Hungarian diocese and the prospects for cooperation between the Church and the academic community.*

- Vladyka Hilarion, what is the background of the document "On the Distortion of the Orthodox Teaching About the Church in the Acts of the Hierarchy of the Patriarchate of Constantinople and the Speeches of its Representatives" which was presented by you and adopted by the Council of Bishops?

- After the interference in Ukraine by Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople and the legalisation of the Ukrainian schism in 2018, the Russian Orthodox Church broke communion with the Patriarchate of

Constantinople. At that time, the Synodal Biblical and Theological Commission was instructed by His Holiness the Patriarch to prepare a document outlining our position on those deviations fr om canonical norms that we observe in the actions of the hierarchy of the Patriarchate of Constantinople.

First, we collected a huge array of quotations, statements from the Constantinople hierarchs themselves, from their supporters and their opponents - a total of about 150 pages. Then we brought the abridged version of the text to the plenum of the Synodal Biblical Theological Commission for discussion, and the plenum approved it. After that, the document was submitted to the Patriarch, who amended it. It was supposed that the text would be further discussed by the Council of Bishops, but the Council was postponed first because of the epidemic situation, then because of the international situation. In the end, when the decision was already taken to hold the Council of Bishops, the document was adapted to its format.

The document also includes information about recent developments in the Patriarchate of Constantinople, particularly Patriarch Bartholomew's visits to Lithuania and Estonia.

- And what is the main idea, the purpose of the document?

- The idea was to explain the points on which the Russian Orthodox Church disagreed with the Patriarchate of Constantinople. And these points turned out to be quite a few. We are talking about disagreement not just with some specific actions, but with a position. This position is set out, and our arguments against it are presented. This is the purpose of this document.

Moreover, this is not the first attempt by our Church to formulate its position. The 2008 Council of Bishops adopted a document "*On the Unity of the Church*", wh ere the points on which the Russian Church did not agree with Constantinople were set out in some detail. But since then, many new points have been added, and they are listed in our document. For each of them we give a detailed exposition of the doctrine of Constantinople itself and how we perceive this doctrine. We show in the document that the acts that led to the schism of the entire Orthodox world were inspired by concepts that we perceive as a distortion of the Orthodox teaching on administration. Therefore, the document is not so much historical as theological in nature.

- You mentioned Patriarch Bartholomew's visits to Lithuania and Estonia - what goals does Constantinople pursue in Lithuania and Estonia, and how does this affect the lives of believers?

- Let me remind you that the [canonical] invasion of Estonia by the Patriarchate of Constantinople took place back in 1996. At that time the Russian Orthodox Church broke communion with Constantinople.

Negotiations were held, following the results of which four months later communion was restored. But the agreements that were reached have still not been fulfilled by the Constantinople side. And the Russian Church has not agreed and will never agree to Constantinople's invasion of Estonia, because Estonia is a historical part of [the Russian Orthodox] canonical territory.

In Lithuania, on the other hand, five clergymen spoke out against their bishop. Some of them had very serious canonical problems (I even know some of them personally), and these clergymen were deprived of their ministry by their ruling bishop. But they appealed to Constantinople, and he restored them all to ministry. All of this is reflected in the latest version of the document, which has now been adopted at the Council of Bishops and published.

- So, what is important is that the document declares the inconsistency with Orthodox teaching and the inadmissibility of Constantinople's actions in Lithuania and Estonia, in particular the restoration by Constantinople of clerics defrocked in another Church?

- Yes.

- What is the status of the document?

- Formally, the document has the status of being approved by the Council of Bishops. The Council of Bishops is not the governing body of the Church. Therefore, the text must still be approved by the Holy Synod, and then, like all acts of the Synod, by the Council of Bishops.

But this is already an official text, it has already been published on the website of the Moscow Patriarchate.

- And when will the Synod consider this document?

- I think the Synod will consider it at its next meeting.

- Will the document become widely known abroad, e.g., how will it be consulted in Constantinople and other Local Orthodox Churches of the world?

- It will be translated into different languages. And, as far as I know, there is a plan to officially distribute it to the Local Orthodox Churches of the world. The document says that we are aware of the importance of making our position known among the Local Orthodox Churches. Because not everyone and not always knows why we do not agree with Constantinople on certain issues.

- Like what, for instance?

- We disagree on matters of principle. For example, when Constantinopolitan theologians present the (Ecumenical) Patriarch of Constantinople as the head of the Ecumenical Church.

- As the "Orthodox Pope"?

- Yes, as a kind of analogue of the Pope. One theologian, who is quoted in our document, explicitly says that the main problem of the Orthodox Church today is the phenomenon of "antipapism". That our lack of a hierarch like the Pope in the Church of Rome is a serious problem, particularly in dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church.

We quote this and other statements - and show that there has never been such a single head in the Orthodox Church.

And we quote the statements of the Patriarchs of Constantinople themselves in the period fr om the end of the XII century to the end of the XIX century, wh ere they prove in a polemic with the Pope that all Orthodox Patriarchs are equal, that there cannot be one Patriarch over another. Now the rhetoric of the Patriarchate of Constantinople has completely changed, as has their very understanding of the structure of Church governance. The main section of our document is devoted to this.

- What other specific points on which the Russian Church disagrees with the Church of Constantinople are the most striking and important?

- For example, the Patriarchate of Constantinople believes that they can accept clerics fr om any Church without a letter of release. That they are the highest court of appeal. Some cleric has sinned, violated the canons, he was banned from serving or defrocked, and he goes to Constantinople - and there he is "restored" and given the right to perform divine duties. This, from our point of view, is complete canonical lawlessness.

We examine in detail the so-called "restoration" to ministry by the Patriarch of Constantinople of those Ukrainian schismatics who have never had canonical ordination. We show that this has caused a very wide negative resonance in the Orthodox world. Not only in our Church, but also in the Serbian, Albanian, Polish and other Churches.

- Do the provisions of the document give grounds for the Synod to recognise Patriarch Bartholomew as a schismatic or a heretic who provokes schism?

- Let it be decided by the Supreme Authority of the Church. The violations referred to in the document concern the canonical order, and they have led to the schism of world Orthodoxy. Schism and heresy are two different concepts. I would not like to mix them here and operate with some concepts that do not appear in our document.

- Do you believe that the arguments presented in the document will encourage the Patriarchate of Constantinople to change its concept and actions?

- I don't personally believe that, but at least these arguments will be persuasive to many who see the wrongness of these actions and our response.

- And how many foreign hierarchs and Churches today are in solidarity with the Russian Church in their views on the actions of Constantinople?

- In the document we have quoted a number of statements by the Primates, Synods and officials of the Local Orthodox Churches of the world who express disagreement with the actions of Constantinople.

- What are the overall implications of this document for those mentioned in it?

- As has been written by [Fyodor] Tyutchev, "God did not let us second-guess how one'd react to words we uttered". But, as the Apostle Peter says, "always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you," (1 Peter 3:15) that is, about your faith and convictions. And in this case, we have given such a detailed and reasoned theological answer.

- Has anyone else in Orthodoxy, apart from Constantinople, ever put forward the position of the primacy of one Patriarch over all other Patriarchs, Metropolitans and Bishops? And why is it wrong?

- The issue is not the primacy itself, but the understanding of the boundaries of this primacy. We have never disputed the primacy of honour of the Patriarch of Constantinople. When the Patriarch of Constantinople came to Moscow, it was he who led the divine service in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, not the Patriarch of Moscow. This primacy of honour belongs to the Patriarch of Constantinople since 1054, when communion with Rome was broken, and before that the primacy of honour belonged to the See of Rome.

But the primacy of honour is one thing, and the primacy of authority is another. And we prove in our text that this venerable primacy of honour does not give the Patriarch of Constantinople any authority outside of his own Local Church. That he cannot, on the basis of the fact that he is the Ecumenical Patriarch,

interfere in the affairs of Local Churches and make any decisions for them.

- Is the issuance by Patriarch Bartholomew of a "Tomos" of autocephaly to the "Orthodox Church of Ukraine" ("OCU", created on the basis of schismatic structures) an example of actions that violate the Church's foundations?

- Yes.

- And why is the Patriarch of Constantinople now acting in this way, trying to become the "Orthodox Pope"? Are these independent decisions or imposed by some forces?

- It's hard for me to comment on his motivation. But we see that year by year these claims are increasing. We cite documents not only from the XIX century or the XVI century, we cite even the statements of the Patriarchs of Constantinople of recent times and show that they did not have the claims that are put forward by the current Patriarch. For example, Patriarch Athenagoras said that the decision on the method and the right to grant autocephaly belongs to the future Orthodox Ecumenical Council. And the current Patriarch Bartholomew, who previously agreed with this, now says the opposite: the granting of autocephaly is supposedly an original and sacred privilege of Constantinople.

- In addition to the document On the Distortion of the Orthodox Teaching About the Church in the Acts of the Hierarchy of the Patriarchate of Constantinople and the Speeches of its Representatives**, the Bishops at the meeting considered a number of other issues - which of them would you single out as the most pressing?**

- I would like to quote the words of His Holiness the Patriarch from his report at the Council of Bishops. He speaks of the current armed confrontation between Russia and Ukraine: "This conflict has already caused numerous casualties. Cities, churches and monastic monasteries have been destroyed, sometimes to the ground. Entire territories are becoming uninhabitable! It is with great pain that I look upon what is happening, even more so the suffering and afflictions of civilians, and especially as on both sides of the frontline there are the children of the one Russian Orthodox Church."

This is a position that clearly demonstrates that the Russian Orthodox Church takes everything that is happening with pain and prays for all those who are victims of the armed confrontation, both military personnel and civilians. The Patriarch recalled that the flock of the Russian Orthodox Church is on both sides of the confrontation, which makes this conflict particularly tragic for the Russian Church.

His Holiness touched on the most important topic of pastoral care for military personnel and a number of other very important topics. His report has a programme character and at the same time sets the

Bishops up for appropriate action in their dioceses. The thoughts that the Patriarch shared with the Bishops are reflected in the resolutions adopted by the Bishops' Council.

For each of the participants this meeting was an opportunity not only to hear the voice of the Primate of the Church, but also to communicate with each other, and for those who wished, also an opportunity to express their opinions.

- Do you now expect that the nature of preaching and communication of clergy with believers will change, that more attention will be paid to the tragedy of military confrontation, spiritual support and help to people whose relatives and friends may be on the different sides of the conflict?

- The clergy in their majority selflessly do everything possible to reassure people, to give them hope and faith, and treat their flock with love. But the word of the Patriarch is always intended to be an impetus to continue to act in this direction, to develop pastoral activity. So that pastors would become even closer to people. So that what the pastors say would reflect the real needs of the people and influence their lives.

- Can the Council of Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church be held now, when Bishops from part of the foreign dioceses cannot come to Moscow, on neutral territory, for example, in Hungary?

- I think that the Hungarian diocese will not be ready to provide for such an event: to receive the entire host of Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church. Our resources for this are too modest. And for the Bishops themselves it will be a very expensive event. For example, my economy-class ticket from Budapest to Moscow via Istanbul cost me four thousand euros. With such airfares, it is difficult or even impossible for some Bishops to arrive either from the far abroad to Russia or from Russia to the far abroad.

- Is a remote (online) format of the Council of Bishops possible?

- Maybe at some point we will get to the point wh ere we use a remote format, but so far there have been no such precedents.

- Are there relocants, Russians or Ukrainians among your Hungarian flock, what are their attitudes, and how do you work with them?

- The peculiarity of the Hungarian diocese has always been [the fact] that it is a multinational diocese.

We have believing Hungarians, believing Russians, we have many Ukrainians. And thank God, we do not have any interethnic problems and conflicts. We live in peace and harmony. We understand that we are all hostages of the current situation, and the best thing in this situation is to help each other, and not to try to find someone to blame and create conflicts. We have a very good peaceful mood both during the Divine service and at those parish events that take place outside the Divine services.

There are now a lot of refugees from Ukraine. Some of them receive official refugee status, some live without such status, and among our flock there are many such people. Of course, they need pastoral consolation, and sometimes they need material assistance. We try to help them as much as we can.

- And how many parishes are there in the Hungarian Diocese today, what are the problems, plans and prospects for development?

- There are eleven parishes in the diocese. There is a church under construction in Hévíz, which, in general, has already been built; the interior of this temple is now being finished. There are three churches that are in the process of restoration. The restoration of the Dormition Cathedral in Budapest is almost completely finished. This is a historic church built in the late 18th century. The Patriarchate of Constantinople tried to claim this church from the Russian Church during the very years when I was the temporary administrator of the Hungarian diocese. All three instances of the court fell at the period when I was there for the first time. With God's help we won [the case with] the Cathedral, winning all the court instances. At the same time the restoration of the Cathedral began. The Cathedral has two spires: one was blown off by a bomb during the bombing of Budapest at the end of the Second World War, and I set the task of restoring that spire. The pedestal for it was then supplied with funds from the Lukoil company. Then I left for Moscow, and the restoration work stopped for several years. And then, the Hungarian state allocated funds for the restoration of this church and two other churchs - in Miskolc and Tokaj (it is still in progress), as well as for the construction of the church in Heviz - finishing works are currently underway there.

- Vladyka, could you, as an expert in the field of interaction between the Church and the academic community, answer the question why we do not hear about research by modern scientists together with Orthodox clergy on incorruptible relics, myrrh-flowing icons, the Holy Fire and other miraculous phenomena, as well as the influence of concentrated prayer on human consciousness and health? In recent years, neurospecialists have been actively studying various phenomena associated with meditation in Buddhist monasteries - are there prospects for similar studies in Orthodoxy?

- In my time, I have made many efforts to establish a dialogue between the Church and the academic community. In particular, the work we did over the years to "legalise" theology was, in my opinion, a

significant success. Today there is no barrier between the Church and the academic community that was artificially created in the Soviet years.

Of course, the possibilities for interaction are far from exhausted, and there are many topics on which the Church and the scientific community can interact, including the scientific study of religious phenomena. Being in Hungary now, I am quite far from this subject. But I hope that the work that we have done, including within the framework of the Scientific and Educational Theological Association (SETA), will not be lost, and that the dialogue between the Church and the scientific community will develop.

Metropolitan Hilarion was interviewed by Olga Lipich

Source: https://mospat.ru/en/news/90563/