



Archbishop Theophan of Korea: Russian churches in Korea can become bridges of friendship with Russia



Orthodoxy in Korea dates back to the late 19th century, when the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Korea was established by decision of the Synod. Archbishop Theophan of Korea (in the world, Alexei Illarionovich Kim), an honorary citizen of Seoul (2006) and the first ethnic Korean to become an Orthodox bishop, spoke about how parishes are developing in South Korea, especially in the context of the Ukrainian events, in an interview with a RIA Novosti correspondent.

- How did the clergy and laity in the diocese feel about the news of the arrest of Metropolitan Pavel, the Abbot of the Kiev Pechersk Lavra? How does everyone feel about the persecution of the clergy of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church by the Ukrainian authorities, persecution of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church?

- The persecution of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church with the connivance, and sometimes with the

participation, of the authorities began in Ukraine quite some time ago. Not the least role in this was played by the actions of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, which interfered in the life of the Russian Orthodox Church by supporting a schismatic group in Ukraine. In favour of this schismatic group, created by the Ukrainian authorities and the Patriarchate of Constantinople, the authorities have taken away churches and expelled priests from those churches which the communities of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church built and in which they prayed. These persecutions have affected, of course, not only the Abbot of the Kiev Pechersk Lavra, but also a large part of the episcopate, clergy and laity of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. There were mass illegal seizures of churches, beatings of clergy, arrests of bishops on spurious pretexts.

We warmly empathise with those who have suffered from slander, beatings, seizures of churches and pray that this turmoil will end soon and that the state will stop persecuting its own citizens on religious grounds.

- Is the example of persecution of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church important for the faithful in the diocese, and if so, why?

- There has always been persecution of Christians in the history of the Church, from the first century to the present day - the Lord Jesus Christ warned His disciples about this. Not so long ago our Russian Church went through a period of persecution from the godless communist authorities. This period brought many new martyrs for the faith to the Church. These persecutions, as well as the persecution of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, speak of the need for Christians to continually strengthen their faith.

- How has the situation on the Korean Peninsula, as well as the life and mood of the parishioners of the Russian Orthodox Church changed with the growing tension in international relations between Russia and the West, and the beginning of the Special Military Operation in general?

- I have not noticed any particular changes in the life of our parishes, except for some inconveniences related to the cancellation of direct flights between Russia and Korea.

- In your opinion, are there prerequisites (historical, political, spiritual) for ending the persecution of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church? If so, what are they? If not, what is needed for these prerequisites to arise?

- It is obvious that the situation with the persecution of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church is connected with the political situation in the country. The authorities should stop interfering in the resolution of Church issues; the actions of the current authorities will not bring peace to the country, but will further divide the people of Ukraine. Also, in my opinion, the international community should draw the attention of the Ukrainian authorities to the constant violation of the rights of believing people in Ukraine and demand compliance with the law on freedom of conscience and religious organisations. But in any case, believing people are sure that everything is in God's hands, and these persecutions have also been permitted by God to happen to the faithful children of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, so we need to intensify our prayers to God for the coming of a speedy peace in Ukraine.

- How is the ministry of the Russian Orthodox Church in Korea developing now? What are the achievements, plans, what can be called the main challenge?

- The Korean diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church was formed relatively recently, in 2019. In fact, the opening of the diocese on the Korean peninsula is a revival of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Korea, which operated from 1900 to 1949. In 2006, a Russian Orthodox Church church was consecrated in Pyongyang, the capital of the DPRK, and in 2019, parishes were formed in South Korea. The parishes mainly unite Russian-speaking citizens from different countries, but there are also parishioners from local residents, as well as parishioners from English-speaking countries.

The first task after the opening of the new parishes was to establish their liturgical life, to provide everything necessary for this - premises, utensils, to appoint ministers. We are supporting all this now, but it must be said that soon after the opening of the parishes not only we, but also the whole world faced a new challenge for our time - the COVID-19 pandemic. Until recently, the country had rather strict restrictive measures in place with regard to religious organisations, which prevented us from developing parish life.

Now the difficult period caused by the pandemic is over, and we have returned to our usual way of worship. Not so long ago we received state registration of our religious organisation, which will allow us to implement our plans more fully. The main problem that our parishes are facing now is the lack of church, we have to rent premises for services, and this significantly limits our opportunities for further development.

- Judging by the diocese's website, are there temples in both the DPRK and the Republic of Korea? How does this affect ministry in the region, what opportunities does it open up? How do the authorities in these countries treat the activities of the Russian Orthodox Church, and has the fact that South Korea is now on the list of countries unfriendly to the Russian Federation had any impact?

- The fact that the diocese is actually located in two countries creates certain difficulties. For obvious reasons we cannot hold a general meeting or a general service. But the fact that the diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church in these countries is one is visible evidence that it was formed for one people, and also speaks to the peacemaking mission that our diocese can play on the Korean peninsula.

As far as the activities of the Russian Orthodox Church are concerned, the local authorities in both countries do not create obstacles to our ministry.

- Please tell us more about the parishes. How many priests are there in the diocese now, and who are they, where were they trained? How many parishioners are there approximately, and what are their demographics?

- There is one parish in the DPRK, Holy Trinity Church in Pyongyang, and two parishes in the Republic of Korea, in Seoul and Busan. Several clerics of the Pyongyang church have received theological training at the theological schools of the Russian Orthodox Church in Russia. One hieromonk - Father Pavel Choi - and one

hierodeacon are now serving in South Korea. Father Pavel received his theological education at the St. Petersburg Theological Academy. The community of the Resurrection parish in Seoul is about 100 people, in Busan about 40 people. This is not counting those people living in Korea, who for various reasons visit churches very rarely, someone lives far away, someone has a limited working schedule, there's quite a significant number of such people in Korea. The main part of parishioners are Russian-speaking citizens from different CIS countries, but among them there are also 20-30 percent of local Koreans, as well as other foreigners from different countries.

- How do local Korean people come to faith? Does it happen often? Are there any missionary activities going on?

- Each of our Korean parishioners had their own unique way of getting acquainted with the Orthodox faith. There is a person who was interested in studying Russian history and then became interested in Orthodoxy, one of our parishioners read several famous books by F.M. Dostoevsky and realised the depth of the Orthodox faith, there are those who became acquainted with reading spiritual literature in Korean, and some came to the Church because of their friends or Russian-speaking spouses. Our missionary work is limited by our strength and capabilities - I mean human resources. We mainly try to share information about Orthodoxy through social media.

- What are the specifics of the service when both Korean and Church Slavonic are used in prayer? When is Korean used and when is Russian used? How have the liturgical texts been translated into Korean, and is this still being worked on?

- We use both Russian and Korean equally in our worship services. The service must be understandable to all, and we endeavour to respond to the needs of all parishioners. The most important parts of the service are duplicated in Russian and Korean. Since the beginning of our diocese, we have been working on translations of liturgical texts. We have registered our own book publishing house, which has published the sequence of the Divine Liturgy, the liturgical Psalter, and now we are actively working on the translation of the liturgical book with the main sequences in Korean. For this work, the clergy of the diocese regularly meet several times a week and work together on the translations. For translations we use original texts in Greek, Church Slavonic, Russian and English. Sometimes we resort to Chinese and Japanese. We also use previously published translations. We discuss each word and phrase, sometimes for quite a long time, and as a result, we leave the version that, in our common opinion, most accurately conveys the meaning of the text being translated.

- Do you think there is a possibility of building an Orthodox church in Seoul or Busan in the future?

- We are very much looking forward to it. The main issue is financial, as the price of land and property is very high in Korea. It is necessary to attract funds from benefactors. We pray that real Russian churches will appear in Korea, which, I am sure, will be real bridges of friendship between Korea and Russia.
