Acting Patriarchal Exarch of Africa: Even more priests wish to join the Russian Orthodox Church



The Patriarchal Exarchate of Africa began 2024 with massive visit of clergymen of the Russian Orthodox Church to various countries on the African continent. In some of them, services for Russian-speaking believers were celebrated for the first time on the feasts of the Nativity of Christ, the Epiphany and the Circumcision of the Lord. Bishop Konstantin of Zaraisk, the new head of the Exarchate, the acting Patriarchal Exarch of Africa, gave his first interview in that office to RIA Novosti agency. He spoke about the selection of clergy for visiting Africa, the highlight tasks, and educational and missionary projects of the Exarchate of Africa.

– Vladyka Konstantin, the Christmas visit of Russian priests to Africa has become the largest in the Exarchate's history. What kind of difficulties did you find in organizing and making it?

– There were some organizational difficulties, because Russian priests were sent to African countries fr
om different dioceses. Vaccinations, documents, letters to embassies and transportation require quite a

lot of efforts, but it was a routine technical work. There were no big problems. All visits took place at the same time, but each one is a separate event. Almost all priests visited two or even three countries. I was joined by seven priests. In total we visited seventeen countries; Christmas liturgies in the Russian Church tradition were celebrated in six countries for the first time. Also, our priests celebrated at the feasts of the Circumcision of the Lord and the Epiphany.

– You said that there were clergymen fr om different dioceses. How were they selected?

– They were the well known to us volunteers. We obtained approval of their participation fr om the diocesan bishops. Those participating in the visit must have some experience of stepping out of comfort zone and a basic level of English or French, which are the most required languages on a large continent of Africa.

– Was the visit to the Republic of South Africa your first visit to Africa? What is your opinion of the diocesan life in the country and the situation with the Exarchate as a whole? Have you done something meaningful?

– Yes, that was my first trip to Africa. I have been abroad many times, but Africa is something special. The first “classic” bishop’s visit took place in the Republic of South Africa, when a bishop visits the diocese entrusted to him and meets with officials. I met with the Russian Ambassador and the Consul General in Cape Town as well as with all the clergymen. In South Africa, I celebrated four services: the Liturgy on the feast of the Circumcision of the Lord and the commemoration day of St. Basil the Great in our Russian church of St. Sergius of Radonezh in Johannesburg; a prayer service at the parish in Robertson, and the All-night Vigil and the Liturgy with the Great Blessing of Waters on the Epiphany at our parish in Cape Town. All the priests in the country concelebrated with me at these services. After the service in Cape Town, we held a meeting of the South African clergy and discussed current issues.

– What were the issues, what do the priests need?

– South Africa is a liturgically organized country, wh ere we have four churches and five priests. The issues were mainly about pastoral practice, such as how a priest should act in a difficult situation, or how to interact with one another. We have opportunities for developing our church life in South Africa as there are Russian communities in the country that do not receive pastoral attention on a regular basis. Of course, all people are also interested in the situation in Russia and in all the complex issues on our agenda.

– There are communities of the Boers in South Africa who have converted to Orthodoxy and are led by local priests. Are these communities growing, and are the new ones appearing?

Are the Boers interested in Orthodoxy?

– You know, there is a wonderful parish of St. John Climacus in Cape Town, wh ere I celebrated on the Epiphany. Fr Nicholas Esterhuizen serving there is a young priest, but a true good shepherd. There are Russians and locals among the members of the parish. As to the development, prospects are very good. I was pleasantly impressed by the church of St. Mary of Egypt in Robertson. Of course, sermons to which hundreds and maybe thousands of people would come is a matter for the future.

The main thing now is to establish a normal and calm everyday church life not only in South Africa, but in all countries wh ere the Exarchate is present. After all, the Orthodox Church is built on daily worship, constant preaching, sacraments, pastoral care, prayers for people, and good deeds. This is a routine matter in the good sense of the word. We see this in Africa, must deal with it and render assistance.

– Is it necessary to send priests fr om Russia to Africa for taking continuing care of our compatriots or locals?

– There are different areas of the Exarchate's activity. One is work with more than two hundred priests who have already joined us. Just a few days ago I interviewed several priests from Africa wishing to join the Russian Orthodox Church. We are ready to accept five of them. So, the dynamics is very positive. The second area is pastoral care of our Russian-speaking brothers and sisters living in various African countries. Above all else, it demands contacts with embassies and local Russian communities, as well as arranging of ‘on-site’ pastoral care activity and the construction of churches wh ere possible or rental of premises. In this context, the decision on assigning Russian priests to serve in Africa might be taken in each concrete case.

– Are there any plans to build new churches and open schools, hospitals, religious and cultural centers?

– The construction of churches is a great matter. Most particularly it concerns communities that have come to us fr om the Greeks. We are trying to scrutinize the situation. I will visit all these countries and celebrate divine services there. We must be realistic. For instance, the purchase of a tent is an urgent matter in one place, while a land problem must be solved in another, or the point at issue is premises and maybe even a church building. Of course, one of the Exarchate’s immediate tasks consists in assessing the situation. We must see what can be done and find monetary and human resources. We do not want to make things up and we give consideration to each community, to each individual case.

– Have you or the priests faced obstacles put by the Patriarchate of Alexandria or other unfriendly forces during this missionary visit?

– I personally have not faced anything like that, there was no antagonism. We maintain our common position which is benevolent and peaceful. The colossal tragedy has occurred. The Patriarch of Constantinople followed by the Greek church world recognized schism in Ukraine. This is a tragedy and pain, but one should not aggravate the situation by cursing and swearing. Yes, we have accepted their priests; they have become priests of the Russian Orthodox Church. Now we are ordering peaceful church life.

– The Exarchate is two years old. How do locals react to its presence?

– I know nothing about any actions of the locals against our clergy and believers. On the contrary, we see a positive situation and great opportunities for preaching Christianity and for doing good deeds.

– Earlier, the Church of Alexandria spoke about judicial measures, up to defrocking, against the leadership of the Exarchate and its clergymen who make missionary visits to Africa. Does the Russian Church recognize the legality of these measures? Is there any information that the Church of Alexandria might take similar steps against you?

– The Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church has not recognized these decisions. Metropolitan Leonid (Gorbachev) and Rev Andrei Novikov and Rev. Georgy Maksimov remain in the priesthood of the Russian Orthodox Church.

– Is there any information that the Patriarchate of Alexandria may prepare the same actions against you personally?

– That remains to be seen.

– Not long ago, Patriarch Theodore of Alexandria said that his clerics had been supposedly paid two hundred dollars each for joining the Russian Orthodox Church, as the Church of Alexandria is very poor. How can you characterize these words? Is it ethical on his part to speak about his own former priests in such a way?

– The sum of two hundred dollars struck me. I can tell you that people who had come from the Greeks undoubtedly have a strong motivation, but it is not a matter of finance, or they would have run around in circles. But they do not run anywhere, they occupy their proper place, although they are being harassed by the Greeks, and many were deprived of their churches.

– That has been reported several times. Also reported have been actions of the Patriarchate of Alexandria such as banning access to water sources to the communities that have abandoned it or removing children of priests from the school. Do such actions continue, and how does the Russian Church cope with them?

– Yes, that is so, and our task is to solve problems. We do it whenever and wherever possible, rendering assistance to our priests and maintaining a spirit of peace. I would like to emphasize once again that my task is not to fan the flames of hostility, but to calm passions.

Incidentally, one can see from your question that if the priests change jurisdiction for money, they most likely would immediately come back. It is not a case of money.

– Are communities of non-canonical Orthodox jurisdictions and parishes of other confessions, for instance, Catholics and Protestants, which are present in Africa, joining the Exarchate?

– They continue to join, but we must be very careful, because people are different and their stories differ. Our task is not just to enhance statistics. If a man who was a priest or bishop in a non-canonical structure agrees to join us as a layman, this is one thing, but that is quite another if he wants to be ordained. We are engaged in dialogue.

– There are male and female novices from Africa in the Russian Church. Is it likely that monasteries and convents of the Russian Orthodox Church will be open in Africa for monastics who are the natives?

– Monasticism is a very serious thing; it is a way of life. Indeed, monastics from Africa used to come and are coming to Russia. Quite recently several sisters have come to Russia to live in convents. This practice will continue, and we are discussing the coming of several more monastics to Russia.

We must be very careful and sensitive. Certainly, people always want to do everything fast and give an account of the results, but we ought to act slowly and surely. Monasticism and monastics is a topical subject. During my trip to South Africa, I talked with a candidate and recommended him to pass practice at the parish.

Let us work and hope in God’s mercy. One good monk, rooted in the tradition, is worth ten monks who know nothing about true monasticism.

– How many priests and monastics are studying in seminaries and monasteries of the Russian Church or are preparing to be ordained or tonsured? What countries are they from?

– There are several monk-priests who have joined the Russian Church and minister as parish priests in Africa. As to the seminary students, there are more than forty studying in our four theological schools. These are the Moscow Theological Academy, the St. Petersburg Theological Academy, the Nikolo-Ugreshskaya Theological Seminary in the Moscow region, and the Tomsk Theological Seminary. At present we have applications from several more seminaries for candidates from Africa.

The students must learn Russian, because all lessons are given in Russian, and it is far from easy for them. I met with all students and I was glad to see that they were nice fellows. There are more than forty of them, but only one was expelled for disciplinary reasons. They are good with different learning abilities and a strong motivation as they are given a chance to be educated in a leading country of the Orthodox world. They all want to return to their homeland. It is a great challenge for us to train them, root a good church tradition in them and prepare them for pastoral ministry at home.

– Are their native languages different?

– Very much so! You know, it just seems that it would be enough to speak English for the solution of all problems, but many of the students speak only French as the second language after their mother tongue. This is a challenge for me, too. I am improving my English now, and I should learn French in the future.

– Do the students minister at parishes?

– There is only one priest among the seminary students, archimandrite Zacharia (Mulingwa) from the St. Petersburg Theological Academy; the others are laymen. Our African brothers study and live in the theological educational institutions like Russian students, abiding by the rules and keeping to the established order. The Russian Church provides them all necessities and gives them full support. Thus they have an opportunity to study, preparing themselves for their future ministry.

After the candidates from Africa complete training, they are ordained and receive experience in Moscow churches, wh ere they make parishioners enjoy litanies and exclamations that they say in their own languages. Strange that it may seem to Russians, but that is all right. This is our Church, too.

– Is the Exarchate developing any educational projects for the African clergy?

– I know that our African brother priests need help in many church issues, such as pastoral work that

includes care for the faithful. This is a very serious challenge for the Exarchate. Something has already been done, but an important area is the translation of the literature. We are seriously thinking about this matter.

We have talked with the two Russian priests willing to join us. They are very experienced in working in Russian theological schools, which we want to involve in our work in the future. I believe that church education is most important. I would like to work on the basis of my own experience as I used to be rector of the seminary and chairman of the diocesan department of religious education and catechization. We hope for God's mercy to us in our educational work and in translation efforts.

– What type of literature are we talking about, and in what languages?

– Africa has a wide variety of languages, but the main one is English. Then go French, Swahili, Portuguese, and local languages. As to the literature, there are very different types, including liturgical, catechetical, educational, apologetical, missionary, as well as the works of the Holy Fathers and the Lives of Saints. Often enough these are simply worded books, rather than multi-volume editions. Libraries must be composed in aid of the priests with respect to local tradition.

I would not like to show all our sores now, but we see certain problems in traditions and know that we should not annoy anyone. After all, education could be a real nuisance.

Our task is to identify the major problems and try to help our African priests to make their church life better than it is at present. We should be sensitive and calm, respect their past and education, and take into account the language issue. We think about the education of priests and the education of children and adults at the parishes as well as about mission. This is a very important problem that cannot be solved instantly.

We are at the very beginning of our journey. There are our priests and some activists who are moving in this direction, thanks be to God. If the Lord gives us time, strength and opportunity to work, then one of the most significant areas, besides the construction of churches, church life and training of priests, will be church education and mission.

– Do you plan to publish these books in Africa or in Russia?

– I say again that we have begun our work not long ago. I believe that something has already been done. There is also a question of copyright; nowadays everyone uses the Internet; sometimes you can put a link and sometimes make a fresh start. We just had a meeting at which we assessed our work with different languages as well as financial and human resources and discussed what needs to be done first

of all.

– You mentioned specific features of the local tradition. What did you mean?

– I thought about divine service. Above all, the Church is the service. One should know how to celebrate the Liturgy along with the order of the sacraments. Traditions might be different. The most delicate subject is local attitude to the sacrament of confession. We have a lot of work to do for ordering church life, and I say it again that we should respect people and their tradition, understand them, and be never annoyed or impatient. Our activities include educational courses, distribution of literature, online training and assistance to people in their coming to Christ and understanding of the true spiritual living tradition.

Let us come back to monasteries and monasticism. This is a matter of knowing monastic tradition. Just one monk who knows this tradition can found a monastery, but a hundred who want to become monks without knowing the tradition will be just a gathering of people who do not want to get married.

– How many priests, parishes, and believers are there in the Exarchate now?

– There are two hundred and eighteen priests fr om Africa on our list. This figure will grow in the nearest future. These priests live in seventeen African countries and minister in twenty-nine countries. So, one priest ministers in several countries. Also, there are five Russian priests sent on mission from Russia. There are over two hundred parishes, but they are not parishes as we know them in Russia as beautiful churches with golden domes. Often the word ‘parish’ means just a settlement; it can be a tent, a hut, or a room.

Back to the question of motivation. I talked with the clerics of the Church of Alexandria who wanted to join the Russian Church and noticed that their motivation was not money as no one asked me about money or how much he would make. I asked all of them about motivation. It is to be in the clean and true Church.

–You have been entrusted with leading both Exarchate’s dioceses. Could African priests be consecrated bishops to head them in the foreseeable future?

– It is normal for a bishop to be selected from the local clergy. Though I believe that this is a task for the future, because today great demands related to educational status and pastoral experience are made on a bishop.

– Parishes of the Russian Church live in the predominantly Muslim environment in many African countries. What can you say about their relationships with Muslims and with non-

Orthodox Christians?

– Dialogue with Muslims is serious-minded and involves careful treatment. The situation differs in different countries, take, for instance, Egypt and Nigeria. Our principled position is to live in peace and in a good-neighbourly way with everyone, while taking into account specific character of the population and historical traditions of each state. The task is to avoid quarrels and go about our own work.

We have strategic partners on the continent **–** the Ancient Churches, which have been ministering here since the first centuries of the Christian era. The first among them are the Coptic and Ethiopian Churches. We have been maintaining a fraternal dialogue with them for a long time; many joint projects are being developed along with relations based on friendship and mutual assistance. For instance, the Coptic Church has granted one of its church buildings to our parish in Cairo for use in perpetuity and is rendering aid to our parish in Hurghada and in several countries, for instance, in Namibia. I visited a Malankara church in South Africa, attended a reception given by a Metropolitan of the Coptic Church, and I saw sincere love for us there.

– It was reported a while back that Kenya could send ten thousands of its citizens to Russia to work there. Does pastoral responsibility of the Exarchate include mission among African migrants in our country?

– My opinion is that in this case hierarchs of the dioceses to which these people may come will be responsible for pastoral care of them.

– Vladyka, the last question. Which tasks are most important to the Exarchate in the nearest future and what are top perspectives?

– They are the ordering of a normal, good and pure church life, the divine services celebrated on regular basis, and everything that is inherent in the Orthodox Church.

I will give you one simple example as we are meeting not far from a hospital. Some people could be interested in what the head physician thinks, or wh ere he gives speeches. His task, however, is to see the hospital running, operations being performed and patients returning to full health.

The Church is a spiritual hospital; its task is to heal the spirit. The Patriarchal Exarchate of Africa is very young, it is only two years old. There are many different questions and problems that demand a wise, pastoral and fatherlike solution, as well as a good “tuning.” Nothing matters more in the Church than worship and good deeds done for the sake of our neighbors. That is what we will do.

Source: https://mospat.ru/en/news/91350/