Metropolitan Hilarion of Budapest and Hungary: Vatican concedes to liberals on the issue of same-sex couples



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His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Rus' is considering the ***conclusion of the Synodal Biblical Theological Commission*** *on the Catholic declaration "Fiducia supplicans". The declaration, recently adopted by the Congregation for Doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church, deals with the blessing of unmarried heterosexual unions and same-sex couples. In an exclusive interview with RIA Novosti, Metropolitan Hilarion of Budapest and Hungary, chairman of the Synodal Biblical and Theological Commission, discussed this high-profile topic, talked about the dialogue with the Catholics, the "papal" claims of the Patriarchate of Constantinople and the communities of the Russian Orthodox Church in Hungary.*

- Vladyka Hilarion, how did the commission which you head deal with the declaration "Fiducia supplicans"?

- We studied this document on behalf of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Rus'. We held a plenary session of the Synodal Biblical and Theological Commission, and I had the opportunity to present the results of the work of the plenary to His Holiness the Patriarch personally.

- Why did the Russian Orthodox Church take up this declaration at all, since it is an internal document of the Roman Catholic Church?

- Because we have a dialogue with the Catholic Church, an interaction. And we felt it our duty to respond to such a radical innovation.

- There are many different interpretations of the declaration: some say that it is an intermediate step towards the church weddings of same-sex couples, others say that the document opens up the possibility for people to receive help fr om the Church, including in the struggle with their passions, that those who come are blessed one by one, and that no imitation of weddings is allowed. What is your opinion?

- The declaration "Fiducia supplicans" elicited an unequivocally very negative reaction from our commission. We were unanimous that this document reflects a very serious departure from Christian moral norms. You said that the blessing can be done one by one, but in fact the document does not say that. The document talks about the blessing of couples. And it mentions two categories of couples. The first one is couples who are in the so-called irregular situations. That is, a man and a woman who live in the state of an unmarried union. There are many such situations in the Catholic Church because the divorce process is very complicated and it is difficult, almost impossible, to get a blessing for divorce in the Church. But the other category of people that the document talks about are same-sex couples. And now the same criteria are applied to both.

- What here, according to the commission, is the main contradiction with Christianity?

- Same-sex couples are spoken of as people who need the blessing of the Church for healing and upliftment. That is, they are to be blessed as couples, not individually. Yes, the declaration expresses, repeatedly and in different ways, a concern that such blessings should not be ritualised, that they should be spontaneous and not resemble a wedding. Because of this concern, various specific recommendations are offered on how to make such blessings different from weddings. The document postulates that the Church's teaching on marriage as the union of a man and a woman open to procreation remains unchanged. But at the same time this practice of blessing same-sex couples, in our view, is in radical contradiction with the Christian moral teaching.

- Could you talk about it in more detail?

- The document says nothing, for example, about the sacrament of Confession, nothing about repentance or the struggle with sin. In other words, the pastoral care that is provided to persons in ‘irregular situations’ or in same-sex cohabitation, according to this document, does not at all imply that, for example, the priest should tell these people about the sinfulness of their way of life. This is particularly true, of course, of same-sex couples. And the word "sin" is mentioned several times in this document, but only in the context of the idea that human sins cannot exceed the love of God, that God's grace works in spite of our sins. No repentance or correction of lifestyle is suggested for those people who come for blessings just as a couple.

- In your opinion, then, why did the Catholic Church adopt such a document - to further recognise unregistered cohabitation and weddings of same-sex couples?

- I don't think we can already talk about same-sex couples getting married [in churches], because for now it is declared that the Catholic Church's teaching on marriage as the union of a man and a woman remains unchanged.

Nevertheless, we see what is happening in Protestant communities: it started with the same thing, with some non-ritualised, spontaneous blessings, and then in some Protestant communities they simply introduced the ritual of blessing same-sex couples. I don't think the Catholic Church is going to get to that point. But all of this is perceived as a very dangerous signal and as a concession by the leadership of the Catholic Church to those liberal circles that are trying to dictate their agenda.

- You said it was a "leadership concession," but what do you know about how the Catholic world, priests and laity in general felt about this document?

- The declaration has already provoked very mixed reactions in the Catholic world. It has, of course, been welcomed and rejoiced at by various gay activists and representatives of sexual minorities. But, for example, the local structures of the Catholic Church have in some cases openly opposed this declaration.

- In which countries has this occurred?

- The Bishops' Conference of Hungary has decided that the blessing of same-sex couples is not possible under any circumstances. The document will not be implemented in Hungary. And also, for example, in Nigeria, in Kazakhstan, in Belarus. I think it will definitely not be implemented in African countries. That is, this document has already caused a serious division within the Catholic Church itself.

- What will happen next to the "document about the document" - the results of the Synodal Biblical and Theological Commission's discussion of the Vatican declaration?

- The Synodal Biblical Theological Commission has always worked on behalf of His Holiness the Patriarch, or the Patriarch and the Holy Synod. When we prepare a text, we then give it to the Patriarch, and then His Holiness decides its fate. Either this document is published, or it is published with amendments, or it becomes the basis for some decisions, actions, letters....

- And what reaction would you expect from Catholics to the conclusion of the Russian Church commission?

- I would not want to predict the reaction, but we have done our job. Our commission is called the Biblical Theological Commission, and we have drawn attention to the fact that there is no way that Scripture can justify this new practice. Because the Scriptures are very clear about same-sex cohabitation. We drew attention to the fact that, in our view, these new decisions of the Catholic Church contradict basic Christian moral norms.

We have travelled our part of the way. It is difficult for me to predict what will be the future fate of the Commission's document, and if it is published, what will be the reaction to it in the Catholic Church. But we have already seen the reaction in the Catholic Church and in the world to the declaration itself ("Fiducia supplicans" - *ed.*).

- How does all this affect the relationship between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church today? And are there any joint peacemaking efforts being prepared now, in particular to resolve the situation in Ukraine?

- I don't know anything about that. When Pope Francis came to Budapest last year and I met with him, there was no discussion about this. It is true that when the Pope was on the plane from Hungary, journalists asked him what he talked about with Prime Minister Orban and Metropolitan Hilarion. And he replied, "Of course, we didn't just talk about Little Red Riding Hood." I think that the Pope was referring, first of all, to Mr Orban, with whom, of course, he discussed political issues. He did not discuss political issues with me.

- Was "Little Red Riding Hood" just a joke?

- Yes, a metaphor. It meant, I guess, that we were talking about serious things.

- You have repeatedly noted that the Patriarch of Constantinople claims to be the "pope" in the Orthodox world. How would you comment on reports that this week he restored to sacred orders Archpriest Alexei Uminsky, who had been defrocked in the Russian Church for violating his priestly oath - refusing to fulfil the Patriarch's blessing to recite the prayer for Holy Rus', which includes a petition for the granting of victory?

- The previous project of the Synodal Biblical Theological Commission was the preparation of a detailed document on the new ecclesiology of Constantinople, that is, on the innovations in the doctrine of the Church. In our opinion, they depart very seriously from the Orthodox Holy Tradition and are, in fact, an attempt to impose on the Orthodox Church on a universal scale a new model of governance similar to that which exists in the Catholic Church. Our document is entitled *The Distortion of the Orthodox Doctrine of the Church in the Actions and Words of the Hierarchy of the Patriarchate of Constantinople* (**approved by** the Council of Bishops in 2023 - *ed.*).

We show in this document that for centuries the Orthodox, including the Patriarchs of Constantinople, in their polemics with Catholics have defended the view that the Local Orthodox Churches are equal among themselves and that there cannot be one earthly head of the entire Universal Church. But the concrete actions that Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople is taking, in particular, to legalise the Ukrainian schism, to "restore to sacred orders" those who have been defrocked for one reason or another, are actions that follow from his new doctrine. After all, Constantinople now proclaims itself the supreme court of appeal.

That is, any cleric of any Local Church who is dissatisfied with the decision of his Supreme Authority can now appeal to Constantinople, and Constantinople will make a decision at its discretion. Moreover, that cleric can territorially remain in the same position, as it was in Lithuania, wh ere Constantinople "restored so sacred orders" the clergy who had been defrocked, and they continued to be in Lithuania. On the basis of those clerics, a parallel structure of the Patriarchate of Constantinople has now been created in Lithuania, whereas this country is part of the canonical territory of the Russian Orthodox Church.

- It turns out that the document adopted last year entitled *The Distortion of the Orthodox Doctrine of the Church in the Actions and Words of the Hierarchy of the Patriarchate of Constantinople* has not yet enlightened the opponents?

- We did not assume that this document would, shall we say, enlighten the hierarchs of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. But, firstly, we had to prepare this document for our internal use - so that everyone in the Church would clearly understand why there was a break (of communion with the Patriarchate of Constantinople - *ed.*), and that we are not talking about some situational disagreements, but about a

fundamental disagreement. Constantinople has developed a whole new ecclesiological doctrine, which is in conflict with the Holy Tradition of the Orthodox Church. In addition, of course, we wanted our document to be read in other Local Churches as well. Especially in those that do not agree with Constantinople. And we know that it was read there with great attention.

- So you note positive results in communication with representatives of other local Orthodox Churches on this issue?

- Yes.

- Vladyka, how has the situation with the restoration and construction of spiritual and cultural objects in Hungary changed recently: the Dormition Cathedral in Budapest, churches in Miskolc, Tokaj, Hévíz?

- Our main site is the Dormition Cathedral in Budapest, which is located in the very centre [of Budapest], on the banks of the Danube River, on Petőfi Square next to the monument to the great Hungarian national poet Sándor Petőfi. The Cathedral was built in the late 18th century. The Patriarchate of Constantinople tried to claim it from us. Just when I was the interim administrator of the Budapest-Hungarian diocese from 2003 to 2009, we were sued by Constantinople. We won all three courts one after the other, but it took about six years. At the same time the restoration of the Cathedral of the Dormition had begun. We were able to restore the pedestal under one of its lost towers, the money for this was given by the Lukoil company.

But a full-fledged restoration became possible after the Hungarian government in 2017 **allocated** a significant amount of money for four sites at once: the Dormition Cathedral in Budapest, St Nicholas Church in Tokaj, The Holy Trinity Church in Miskolc and the church in honour of the icon of the Life-Giving Source in Hévíz. Unfortunately, the pandemic severely slowed down the restoration work in the first three sites and the construction of the fourth. But now the restoration of the Cathedral of the Dormition is in its final stage. The external repairs are finished, the internal repairs are almost complete, and we are now engaged only in the restoration of the icons in the iconostasis.

The temple in Hévíz is completed and finishing works are underway. The other two sites are still in varying degrees of readiness: in Miskolc, restoration work is still ongoing, in Tokaj it is close to completion.

Metropolitan Hilarion was interviewed by Olga Lipich

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