The Patriarchal Exarch of Africa on Orthodoxy in Equatorial Guinea



Communication Service of the DECR, 30.12.2024.

In December, the Patriarchal Exarch of Africa, Metropolitan Konstantin of Zaraisk, visited Equatorial Guinea. During his trip, he held a series of meetings with representatives of the local Ministry of Justice, Religious Affairs, and Human Rights, as well as with members of the Russian diplomatic corps. He participated in the grand opening of the Russian House in Malabo, celebrated the Divine Liturgy, and conducted a humanitarian initiative for schoolchildren in the capital in collaboration with the "African Initiative." In an interview with "AI" correspondent Pavel Gatalay, Metropolitan Konstantin spoke about the Church's missionary activities on the continent and the establishment of a parish in Equatorial Guinea.

– Metropolitan Konstantin, could you share your impressions of Equatorial Guinea? Is this your first visit here?

– Yes, this is my first time in this wonderful country, my first time in Malabo and other cities located on the island part of the country. My impressions are overwhelmingly positive: it’s a gorgeous country with

stunning nature. Malabo is a lovely, very clean city, warm and welcoming, with a preserved historical center and friendly people.

– In October of last year, a parish was established in the country. How are services being conducted there at the moment?

– Currently, we are at the stage of organizing church life here, so it's too early to say that a formal parish has been established. However, what makes Equatorial Guinea unique is that there are several individuals here—living in different places, with different statuses and backgrounds—who find this topic important and interesting. They reached out to me and my assistants with a desire to see church life begin here. Liturgical services were being conducted even before my arrival, and now I have also celebrated the first service here. Fr om this point forward, we are just at the beginning of the journey. It's too early to say that a parish has already been fully organized, but I believe that if everyone interested in this works diligently and prays fervently to God, we will soon be able to establish a parish—not just in words, but in action, including obtaining registration, land, and building a church.

– Do the members of the newly formed community here know the prayers to Orthodox saints, and is work being done in this direction?

– Regarding the local residents—our compatriots—these are people with varying degrees of church involvement who are already capable of participating in services. One of our brothers served as an altar assistant, another sang, and a third read. So, there is potential and resources here. As for the people who are working here temporarily, it's a slightly different situation: it's clear that they came here for work, and what's important to them is simply pastoral care. As for the local citizens who have expressed a desire to become Orthodox (one has already joined the Russian Church, and others wish to do so in the future), we are at the very beginning of an educational journey with them.

– There is a significant number of graduates of Soviet and Russian universities living in Equatorial Guinea. Have you had the chance to interact with them?

– Although I haven't had any formal experience of interacting with graduates of Russian universities here, I've already met several citizens of Equatorial Guinea who speak Russian. It's evident that they are locals, which is quite unexpected. One of my interlocutors, in fact, held a high-ranking position—and suddenly they responded in Russian!

– Do you believe that educating Equatorial Guineans in Russia fosters their interest in Orthodoxy?

– I think that for young people who go to study in Russia, encountering a new culture and a vast country is already an enormous impression in itself. In Russia, the Orthodox Church is flourishing, and for someone living there, it's very difficult not to notice Orthodoxy. So we hope that some of them will become interested and also join the Orthodox Church.

– How would you assess the interest of Equatorial Guineans in developing cultural relations with Russia and in fostering Orthodoxy here in their country?

– We still have a great deal of work to do. At the same time, the atmosphere here is friendly and engaged, which gives us hope that we will do our work well.

– Could we say that Orthodoxy might become a new cultural bridge between Russia and Equatorial Guinea?

– The fact is, before our arrival, there was no canonical Orthodox Church here. We are at the very beginning of the journey: in the process of obtaining registration for our Church, organizing a future parish that will serve our compatriots fr om Russia and the countries of the former Soviet Union, those who come here for temporary work, as well as locals who are interested in true Orthodoxy. So I think we have a lot of hard and thoughtful work ahead. This requires diligent, attentive, and careful effort, with the hope that what we accomplish will not only serve as a path to the Kingdom of Heaven for those who wish to become members of the Orthodox Church but also as a cultural bridge between our countries.

– In your opinion, what specific socio-cultural relationships should Russia and Equatorial Guinea develop today fr om the perspective of the Russian Orthodox Church?

– Fr om the perspective of the Russian Orthodox Church, everything should happen naturally. First, establishing an Orthodox parish here. Then, educational projects—helping local residents gain access to education. And also social projects. I think these two main wings—education and social projects—are key.

– How many missionaries are currently serving in Africa? How do they serve, and how does a typical service in Africa differ fr om one in Russia?

– The service is the same for everyone. There are cultural and local traditions, which can vary significantly, but the Holy Divine Liturgy—the main service—is essentially the same for all churches. As for the unique aspects of African worship, you know, there's still not much to boast about here; there's a lot of work ahead.

As for missionaries, I can say we have almost 250 priests, five of whom are from the countries of the former USSR and are Russian citizens, while the rest are local clergy from 32 African countries.

These priests serve as parish catechists, helping at parishes by conducting talks about the basics of the faith before baptisms. In many parishes, Mothers' Unions have been organized. We haven't kept exact statistics, nor have we set such a goal, but we see great potential. Most importantly, we see a large number of parishioners who attend these churches and need church education. Therefore, I hope that this work will only grow stronger.

– How do you see the role of the Russian Orthodox Church in addressing humanitarian and educational issues in Africa?

– Here, the role of the Church is tied to the role of our state. The Church is ready to pray and organize church life. The state, however, is not just the government but also good-hearted people. So our task is to talk about this new experience, about the life of the exarchate, and about its challenges. Many in Russia don't even know about the existence of the African exarchate. We've already started addressing this on our website. We are collecting donations for various projects. For example, the Synodal Department for Church Charity and Social Ministry recently organized a fundraiser to help those suffering from hunger in Malawi.

Thus, all people of goodwill living in Russia who want to participate in something new can help Africans.

– In your opinion, are there any unique cultural or religious aspects in Africa that influence the work of missionaries here?

– I think we should show great respect for everything local, except for things that directly contradict conscience and Orthodox faith. But if these local traditions do not contradict Orthodoxy, conscience, or morality, then we must approach them with respect and acceptance. These are our people; these are our brothers and sisters. We are not above them.

So, if these people love to sing in their own way, let them sing. If they want to dance, let them dance. If they want to glorify God in a way that is customary for them, that's wonderful. The key here is to show great respect and attentiveness, so that each of them understands that they are a beloved child of God, my brother or sister.

– Is it true that some clergy in Africa sometimes dance during services?

– Let them dance. What’s the contradiction here? It’s a matter of cultural traditions. There’s one tradition, and there’s another. Some are better, some are worse—that’s true. You can’t compare Andrei Rublev’s "Trinity" with a child’s drawing and say they’re the same. But we respect both the child’s drawing and Rublev’s "Trinity." Over time, as people are educated and introduced to the best, some things naturally fade away.

Our task, therefore, is not to offend people or make them resent us but to show them beauty. To show them the very best and offer it to them, so that they say, "Oh, this is good; I want this."

– How is the Russian Orthodox Church currently cooperating with other denominations in Africa?

– Our fundamental position is to maintain peace with everyone. In every country wh ere we arrive or wh ere we are already present, we strive, first and foremost, to have peace with the authorities in accordance with the laws of that country, and secondly, to maintain peace with everyone around us.

– How does the Russian Orthodox Church support the spiritual needs of our emigrants living in Africa?

– This is a very significant and serious issue. Indeed, on the one hand, we are focused on the local residents who come to us. On the other hand, in practically every African country, there are Russian people in one way or another. In some countries, everything is already well-organized. For example, in Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, South Africa, and Mauritius, there are already Orthodox churches wh ere any Russian person can come. These are churches of the Russian tradition.

There are also a number of countries, including Equatorial Guinea, wh ere we are in the process of organizing church communities of the Russian tradition.

But, in principle, looking to the future, we hope that if the Lord grants us time, strength, and opportunities, we will have in each African country a place of gathering—churches and communities wh ere every Russian person can come to pray in the Russian tradition.

Source: https://mospat.ru/en/news/92696/