



Metropolitan Hilarion: We hope that the Turkish authorities will keep their promise to preserve the Hagia Sophia mosaics

On 18 July 2020, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, head of the Moscow Patriarchate for external church relations, answered questions from Ekaterina Gracheva, presenter of the Tserkov i Mir talk show broadcast by the Russia 24 TV channel.

E. Gracheva: Good day! I am Ekaterina Gracheva. It is Tserkov i Mir talk show at Russia-24. We are talking with Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, about the major topics of this week in Russia and in the world. Good day, Your Eminence!

Metropolitan Hilarion: Good day, Ekaterina! Good day, dear brothers and sisters!

E. Gracheva: Without exaggeration, the main news is the developments around Hagia Sophia church in Turkey. President of the Russian Federation Putin had a telephone talk with Turkey's leader Erdogan. In this talk, Erdogan assured him that the Christian mosaics will not be touched and access to the church will be open for all Christians. I have a question: why it is Erdogan of all the world leaders who decided to talk about it precisely with Putin?

Metropolitan Hilarion: First, as far as it can be judged from the official report about the talk, which took place about Hagia Sophia, the topic of Hagia Sophia was not raised by Erdogan, but by Putin. I think that it testifies to the concern existing in Russia not only on the level of the Church, but also on the level of the state over the decision adopted by the Turkish authorities. The point is that for millions of Orthodox Christians throughout the world, Hagia Sophia church was and will remain a church. In this case, the Turkish authorities have ignored the will of the Christian world and have taken as a basis the opinion prevalent in the Turkish Muslim community.

Certainly, this event has been perceived throughout the Christian world as another blow dealt on Christianity amidst the persecutions to which Christianity is subjected in various parts of the world, including the Middle East and North Africa. After our Patriarch made a statement, the Russian Federation State Duma made a statement; the Russian Federation president, too, touched upon this topic in his talk with Turkish President Erdogan and shared the concern caused by this decision in the Christian world.

E. Gracheva: News agencies report that in this talk with Putin, Erdogan guaranteed that the legendary ages-old Christian mosaics would not be stroked off or painted over but only darkened during Muslim prayers. Thus, it is a certain compromise. Interestingly, Erdogan did not give any such guarantees to religious leaders but he has given them to Putin. Therefore, if Putin had not raised this theme in the talk, the fate of the mosaics would have been obscure.

Metropolitan Hilarion: I hope that President Erdogan respects President Putin and will not simply ignore his opinion. I hope that the talk will also influence the decision on the fate of the Christian symbols and these priceless mosaics, which have survived by a miracle.

You certainly know that when Constantinople fell to the Turkish onslaught and when the church was converted into a mosque for the first time, almost all the mosaic adornment in it was destroyed; it was just hammered off, while where it was covered by plaster perhaps because of a lack of time for hammering or for some other reasons, it has survived but not for preservation at all. It was painted over purportedly to be never seen by anyone. Nevertheless, the mosaics have survived by a miracle, and there are artistically priceless mosaics and for all the Christians it is the greatest shrine.

For us, Orthodox Christians, the church of Hagia Sophia of Constantinople is the same as St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome for the Catholics. Therefore, it is with a great grief that we take in the decision made and the fact and in the political world, almost nobody except for President Putin has responded to this development. Nevertheless, we hope that the promises given by Erdogan to Putin will be kept and the mosaics will be preserved. As for darkening or curtaining them during Muslim services, I hope the new masters of this church themselves will sort it out. What is the most important thing for us is that the Christian heritage should be preserved, that access to it should be preserved and that despite the conversion of a church into a mosque, not for the first time though, Christians should have access to this church and the surviving shrines.

E. Gracheva: In both Russia and Ukraine, Orthodox publicists partial to this development have actively spoken out about it. For instance, there is an opinion that through this event God has punished Patriarch Bartholomew for the Ukrainian schism, while the SINFO vice-chairman Alexander Shchipkov believes that the Ecumenical Patriarch alone is guilty of the transformation of Hagia Sophia into a mosque. Is it the official position of the whole Russian Orthodox Church or you have a different opinion?

Metropolitan Hilarion: I cannot agree with that. The official position of the Russian Orthodox Church has been recently expressed on many occasions: in the statement of His Holiness the Patriarch and in the statement of the Holy Synod, and in my repeated addresses, including in our talk show. Generally, the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate is the body empowered to

express the position of the Russian Orthodox Church on external affairs.

Of course, we cannot blame Patriarch Bartholomew for failing to keep the Turkish authorities from making this decision because we know that in many other cases the Turkish authorities do not pay any attention to his position and his opinion. But it is a fact that Orthodoxy has come to face this sad event being weakened. Regrettably, the division, which happened because Patriarch Bartholomew recognized the Ukrainian schismatics, has not benefitted the Orthodox Church – now it is already obvious to all.

However, both journalists and historians draw parallels recalling the year 1453 when a few years earlier the Patriarch of Constantinople signed unia with Rome. In other Churches, this unia was not recognized; it was not recognized in the Russian Church. Later Constantinople fell and Hagia Sophia was converted into a mosque. Now some critics and publicists draw a parallel with those events and say that last year the Ukrainian schism was legalized and this year Hagia Sophia is converted into a mosque, linking that story with the present one. But, I will repeat, these statements do not correspond with the position of the Russian Orthodox Church.

E. Gracheva: Now let us move to the development in Montenegro. Patriarch Kirill has called the Montenegrin authorities to stop the persecutions against the Serbian Church, while making this appeal not for the first time and stressing that a secular ruler cannot create a Church. What weight Patriarch Kirill's word has in Montenegro?

Metropolitan Hilarion: In Montenegro, a conflict between state and church has been going on for many months now. It is very similar to what happened in Ukraine under President Poroshenko, when he stated that independent Ukraine should have the independent church; he supported the schismatics and managed to get Patriarch Bartholomew's support. We know only too well what the legalization of the schism has led to: it has split the Orthodox Church and put finish to the political career of the initiator of this shady enterprise, Mr. Poroshenko.

What is going on in Montenegro is about the same because there is a schism: there is a small schismatic group that calls itself the Montenegrin Orthodox Church and the canonical Church to which an absolute majority of the Orthodox faithful belong. President Djukanovic, who is neither a believer nor, as far as we know, a baptized man, has decided to create in Montenegro its own church separate from the Serbian Orthodox Church. By right or wrong he is seeking to incline the canonical Church to this decision, but the canonical Church, as was the case in Ukraine, does not accept such shady enterprise, which is quite natural. To speed up this process and to score points in the pre-election struggle – the elections in Montenegro are due in the end of August – Mr. Djukanovic has initiated the adoption of a law that has provoked many disputes and has been negatively assessed by the so-called Venice Commission and has been absolutely rejected in both the canonical Church of Montenegro which

belongs to the Serbian Orthodox Church and among the Montenegrin people. According to this law, all the church property that was built before 1918 should go to the state which will decide to whom it should be handed over.

Of course, the Montenegrin people have rightly seen in it an encroachment on the ages-old shrines of canonical Orthodoxy and have made a stand for the Church. There were thousands-strong processions with the cross throughout Montenegro until they were prohibited under the pretext of the quarantine and now people – medical doctors, military and people of other walks of life – are collecting signatures in defense of the canonical Church in Montenegro.

We have repeatedly warned, including in our talk show: if a ruler goes against his people, it will lead to no good for him. Regrettably, so far the events have been developing according to the saddest scenario.

E. Gracheva: Telegram Channels in Russia, which are closely following the life of the Russian Orthodox Church, have noticed that while Patriarch Kirill comments on the developments in Turkey and Montenegro, the management of the Russian Orthodox Church is paralyzed because of the coronavirus. The reason is that the Holy Synod has not met for about three months and, allegedly, Patriarch Kirill does not want to hold it by remote connection. Is it really so, because, as far as I know, the Holy Synod met on 16 July. In what form was it held?

Metropolitan Hilarion: First, I would like to advise our TV viewers not to use the information coming from Telegram Channels because nobody is responsible for the authenticity of this information. These people are rather irresponsible, gathering information in some corners, through informants, through minor staffers of some church institutions; then they draw a picture presented as an insider's view but actually it is just an incompetent picture, inaccurate and often erroneous.

In this case, Telegram Channels' concern is astonishing because the church leadership knows better how to manage the Church, when to hold sessions of the Synod and in what format they are to be held. The Church has various ways of settling accumulated issues. If it is not possible to hold a meeting in the face-to-face format for the simple reason that the borders are closed and people cannot fly to Moscow, it means that we decide on the remote connection, as was the case this week when the Synod made a number of decisions on accumulated matters.

E. Gracheva: Thank you very much, Your Eminence, for your answers to our questions.

Metropolitan Hilarion: Thank you, Ekaterina.

