



Metropolitan Hilarion: Constantinople is no longer the leader of the world Orthodoxy

Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, head of the Moscow Patriarchate department for external church relations, gave an interview to TASS news agency.

- Your Eminence, the other day the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church made a decision to discontinue the Eucharistic communion with the Patriarchate of Constantinople. How will his decision affect church life in our country and the life of the world Orthodoxy as a whole?

- The daily church life of parishioners of churches in Russia will not be affected in any way: divine service are celebrated, people make confession and take communion and live a full-fledged church life.

As for the situation in the world Orthodoxy, the actions of the Patriarchate of Constantinople to recognize the schismatics in Ukraine, to invade somebody else's canonical territory and to state its right to cancel decisions made by other Churches have completely changed the pattern of cooperation which took shape in the 20th century. The Patriarch of Constantinople, who has positioned himself as the coordinator of common Orthodox activity, can no longer be such a coordinator for an obvious reason. He has self-destructed as the coordinating center for canonical Churches by having opted for schismatics and having fully associated himself with them.

- Have any alternative responses been considered to the essentially non-canonical decisions of Constantinople?

- I would like to draw your attention to the fact that, though Constantinople used to make unfriendly steps towards the Moscow Patriarchate for quite a long time, to which we had to react, at each stage we would still leave an opportunity for them to think twice and review their decisions. However, the decisions of the Patriarchate of Constantinople Synod published on October 11, which 'revoked' the decision adopted over 300 years ago to transfer the Metropolis of Kiev to the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate, admitted to communion the leaders of the schism in Ukraine and stated its readiness to realize the project for 'Ukrainian autocephaly', regrettably has not left us with any arguments against a breakup of relations.

- How correctly is it to speak of a new schism in the world Orthodoxy in the context of the recent events?

- Nearly a thousand years ago, the ungrounded claims of one of the Primate to the sole right to power in the Church already led to a large-scale schism. Now this dangerous path has been taken by the Patriarchate of Constantinople. And already now we have to ascertain with bitterness the existence of a division that does not allow speaking of the 300-million-strong community of the Orthodox Christians as a one whole. The Patriarchate of Constantinople, having recognized schismatics and entered into communion with them has itself departed into schism.

Moreover, the stated plans 'to grant autocephaly' mean nothing else but the making out of the schismatics a parallel structure in Ukraine bypassing the already existing canonical Church, which is expressly prohibited by holy canons – the laws on which church life is built. It is a decision, as made in defiance of the opinion of the Moscow Patriarchate and ignoring the calls of other Local Church to discuss the existing problems in council, which will have far-reaching negative consequences.

The Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church called upon the Primate and Holy Synods of the Local Orthodox Churches on August 15 to make an appropriate assessment of the anti-canonical actions of the Patriarchate of Constantinople and to 'search together for ways of coming out of the gravest crisis tearing apart the body of the One Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church'.

- Many disputes have been provoked by Phanar's decision to revoke the 1686 decision to transfer the Metropolis of Kiev to the Moscow Patriarchate. How far does this decision correspond to the historical truth?

- Imagine that you have a house in which your ancestors have lived for three hundred years and today your children live in it. It is your family property but three thousand years ago it was handed over to your family by some other family. And now a certain descendent of those grantors appears and says that it was, as it turns out, not a gift but this house with the land was simply leased to your family for a time being. And it does not matter that the house was three times smaller, the adjacent territory has become five times bigger, and many generations of your ancestors lived there and cultivated the land. Now another master appears and cancels out all this history and requires that you and your children should move out. What is it but a lawless act and robbery? Would you admit such claims as lawful?

The Statement of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church considers this topic in detail and underscores the canonical invalidity of the resolution 'to revoke' the decision in the 1686 document signed by Patriarch Dionysios IV of Constantinople and the Synod of the Church of Constantinople confirming that the Metropolis of Kiev was to stay in the Moscow Patriarchate as its part.

The canons of the Orthodox Church do not allow of a possibility for reviewing the established church

borders that have not been challenged for a long time. Why has Constantinople not challenged this decision for over 300 years but now, in so ambiguous political conditions, has suddenly decided to put under his control the Orthodox people in Ukraine, including those in the regions that did not belong to the Metropolis of Kiev three centuries ago? Indeed, at that time the Metropolis of Kiev extended its pastoral responsibility to a territory much smaller than the present domain of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. But Constantinople prefers to ignore the history of the development of church life for the considerable past time and to pay no attention to the opinion of the canonical Ukrainian Church, her Primate, His Holiness Metropolitan Onufry, and her hierarchs.

I will remind you once again: the 1686 Synodal Charter and other documents accompanying it do not state anything about a temporary nature of the transfer of the Metropolis of Kiev to the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate, nor about a possibility for revoking this act. Moreover, it should be taken into account that the 1686 decision did not spring from nowhere: it became an end of the two hundred year's period of a forced division in the ages-long history of the Russian Church, which, despite changing political circumstances, invariably was aware of herself as a one whole. Precisely for this reason our Synod in its statements affirmed: 'The present action of the Patriarchate of Constantinople is an attempt to hijack what has never belonged to it'.

- A pressing question asked by many Russian believers: Does the decision to discontinue the Eucharistic communion with Constantinople mean a ban for visiting churches of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, in particular, those on Mount Athos so popular among our pilgrims? Can our pilgrims put candles in Athonite churches?

- Those who wish can go to Holy Mountain to visit Athonite monasteries. But to participate in Sacraments – confession and communion – is what the faithful of the Russian Orthodox Church should not do there since the Eucharistic communion with the Patriarchate of Constantinople with its jurisdiction over the monasteries on Mount Athos has been severed because of its non-canonical, and I would say straight, brigand's actions.

At the same time, I would like remind believers: one can pray to God and seek to save one's soul not only on Athos. 'Salvation does not come from a place', says St. Theophanes the Recluse. Perhaps, the present circumstances will encourage some to make a pilgrimage to 'Northern Athos' – in the monasteries of Valamo or Solovki or other holy places in our land – to come to the knowledge of the Russian monastic tradition, to take part in the Liturgy, to make confession and partake of Christ's Holy Gifts in these churches and monasteries.

- How does the Russian Church plan to solve the problem of pastoral care for compatriots residing in the territory of the Patriarchate of Constantinople?

- Our faithful who live outside the canonical territory of the Russian Orthodox Church, have visited parishes of the Patriarchate of Constantinople almost throughout the world. But in most countries there are churches of other Local Churches too, so they have an alternative. More difficult is the situation of our compatriots in the territory of Turkey and on Rhodes, Crete and other Greek islands of the Dodekanese in the Aegean Sea. After the Patriarchate of Constantinople has identified itself with schismatics and thus proved itself to be in schism, they have been left without pastoral care. This problem stands very acutely on the agenda. We have already received letters from the faithful who ask: What are we to do? Let us think how to solve this new problem.

- Can it be expected that other Local Orthodox Churches will support our position and discontinue the Eucharistic communion with Constantinople as well?

- I do not think it would be right to predict the decisions of Local Orthodox Church. We will inform them about our decision and reasons that have forced us to make it.

It can be stated that as for today there have been no statements by other Local Churches expressing their support for the anti-canonical steps of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. On the other hand, in a recent talk with the mass media the Patriarch of Serbia said that Patriarch Bartholomew made a decision that he had to right to make and this may involve catastrophic consequences. Even before Constantinople's decision on admitting the schismatics into communion in Ukraine and on establishing 'stauropegions' in the canonical territory of the Moscow Patriarchate, there were proposals voiced by various Churches that the existing problems should be discussed at the pan-Orthodox level. Regrettably, these proposals were not heard by Patriarch Bartholomew.

- Commenting on the decision of the Holy Synod, the Ukrainian President Petr Poroshenko stated that the Russian Orthodox Church would find herself in isolation. How far does this prediction correspond to reality?

- It is a high-flown utterance, but let us look how adequate it is as a reflection of the present situation. By its actions Constantinople itself has placed itself outside the canonical space – which was noted with regret in the decision of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church on October 15.

The Patriarch of Constantinople is sometimes called the spiritual leader of the 300 million Orthodox believers on the globe. Now no less than a half of this number – the faithful of the Moscow Patriarchate are not in the Eucharistic communion with him at all. What kind of a pan-Orthodox leader is he after that? As for other Local Orthodox Churches, then, as I have already said, so far none of the Local Churches has openly supported Constantinople.

- Patriarchate Bartholomew has decided to begin the process of granting autocephaly in Ukraine. Does it mean that in Russia there may appear churches and parishes of the so-called 'Kiev Patriarchate'?

- There have been structures of the schismatic 'Kiev Patriarchate' in the territory of Russia for already a long time. Moreover, in May 2017, the schismatics decided to establish a certain 'Russian Exarchate'. I do not think it will be productive to reflect on how the status of these structures may change in connection with particular steps of Constantinople. Schismatics remain schismatic if they do not repent of their action and return to the Church from which they departed.

- What advice do you give to the faithful of the canonical Ukrainian Church who do not accept Constantinople's decisions? What do you think, how long may take the healing of the new crisis in the Orthodox world?

- I would like to call the Orthodox faithful in Ukraine to stay faithful to the canonical Church and to do everything to support His Beatitude Metropolitan Onufry of Kiev and All Ukraine in spite of any threats and provocations from whatever side, in spite of promises and appeals of the schismatics and those representatives of the authorities who, for their own political interests, have embarked on the path of interference in the affairs of the Church. Let us remember that our Church, also in the Ukrainian land, in various ages did withstand many trials with dignity. Even during the atheistic persecution in the 20th century, atheists tried to destroy the Church but the Church held out.

As for the crisis provoked by Constantinople in the inter-Orthodox relations, I would certainly hope that reason will prevail and the Patriarchate of Constantinople will withhold from further actions on the pernicious path of division. It do not think it is right to conjecture how it might happen and at what time. Meanwhile, regrettably, the latest events point to a reverse tendency. We have heard not once from representatives of Constantinople: 'We are not going to heal the schism by creating a new schism'. But now it is precisely what is happening.

Interviewers Yekaterina Yefimova

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