Metropolitan Hilarion: If the project for Ukrainian autocephaly is carried through, it will mean a tragic and possibly irretrievable schism of the whole Orthodoxy

Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, head of the Moscow Patriarchate department for external church relation, has given an interview to the Greek newspaper Ethnos tis Kiriakis.

- Your Eminence, the Ecumenical Patriarchate has published for the first time some historical documents that prove that the Ukrainian Church has never withdrawn from the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical throne. We would like to hear your opinion on this problem.

- The official site of the Patriarchate of Constantinople has published only two documents about a move of the Metropolis of Kiev to the Moscow Patriarchate as its part, and it is not done for the first time, they are well known in our country and have been published since the 19th century. Its preface abounds in inaccuracies and ungrounded conclusions. But we are glad to have a possibility for a discussion, though distant, and ready to broaden the academic outlook of our opponents. Now it is at least clearer what reasoning they wish to rely on.

The first articles of leading Russian historians on the canonical unity of the Russian Church and transfer of the Metropolis of Kiev to the Moscow Patriarchate have been published in a recent issue of the Department for External Church Relation's journal *Church and Time.* Recently a new issue has come out with a substantial article by Mikhail Zheltov entitled 'The Historical-Canonical Foundations of the Unity of the Russian Church', which gives a detail account of the events of the year 1686 and demolishes ungrounded opinions of some biased researchers. These publications will continue so that the attentive reader could have an opportunity for making an objective evaluation of the arguments put forwards by the both sides. We will translate these academic materials into Greek as well. By the end of this year, we plan to publish a substantial study that includes hundreds of sheets of archive documents – many of them will be really publish for the first time. Some of them are already available on the Orthodox Encyclopaedia portal. Naturally, it is impossible to relate this body of testimonies in a brief interview. I can only say that allegations about a 'temporary nature' of the Metropolis of Kiev's transfer to the Moscow Patriarchate come from a tendentious and scientifically unscrupulous interpretation of the documents signed by Patriarch Dionysios in 1686. Believe me we are ready for an objective and fundamental discussion. Moreover, we have proposed a serious dialogue on this matter to the Patriarchate of Constantinople, a joint conference. So far no response. After all, the case in question is

very important as it concerns many millions of Orthodox Ukrainians.

- As the main spokesman for the opinion of the Moscow Patriarchate, you have become a target for unfavourable comments because of your rhetoric with regard to the Ecumenical Patriarchate on the Ukrainian problem. Some believe that such a rhetoric does not correspond to Christian ideals. Is this criticism against you is unfair and why is it happening in such a way?

- I am partly familiar with this criticism. Sometimes it becomes utterly absurd. For instance, in a recent publication in the official blog of the Patriarchate of Constantinople I was accused of 'connections' with the Old Believers schism. And there are my photos at the divine service in an Old Believers' church, clad in old Russian vestments. One who knows at least something about the history of the Russian Church does know that Yedinoverie (same faith) members are followers of 'the old rite' who joined the canonical Church as far back as the 19th century. Unlike the Ukrainian schism, they are a canonical part of our Church and of the whole world canonical Orthodoxy.

Actually, I as a Christian and scholar is profoundly upset by such a style of polemics. We wish our brothers could have an objective information and could have a better and deeper knowledge of the history of the Russian Church and her situation today and of the Ukrainian church problem. It would be more beneficial for us all and then our dialogue could be more productive.

Recently the English version of the report made by His Grace Bishop Makarios of Christopolis at the recent Synaxis of the Constantinople hierarchy, entitled 'On the Ukrainian Church Problem' was published. One can only wonder how badly the author of the report made to such an important forum is acquainted with the history of the Ukrainian problem. A confusion of facts of the history of our Church, mistakes in dates, a confusion of Councils and non-canonical jurisdictions of Russia and Ukraine… Suffice it to say that several 'synaxises' of Russian 'Rennovators' and schismatics of the 20th century are enumerated there as 'Councils' of the canonical Church. It is terrible to imagine that such 'studies' could become the basis for an official position of the Ecumenical Patriarchate!

- A few days ago you published a photograph depicting Ukrainian President Poroshenko as an altar boy who takes part in a procession with the cross held by the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, though a few years later, already the President, he takes communion from the hands of a Uniate archbishop. How, in your view, can this exposure help solve the Ukrainian problem?

- I did not publish these photographs. They have been going around in the Ukrainian segment of the Internet for a few years now, and they have appeared on Greek resources as well. It is a fact that Mr.

Petr Poroshenko took communion with the Uniates. The evolution of the Ukrainian President's religious beliefs is his private affair. For the last several years there has been a complete change in the power and political agenda in Ukraine, and the political influence of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church has considerably grown. Thus, the chairman of the Ukrainian parliament and a majority of deputies who wrote already in 2016 an appeal to the Ecumenical Patriarch about 'a review' of the 1686 documents and the granting of autocephaly to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church are Greek Catholics. Perhaps, all this has somehow influenced the religious views of Mr. Poroshenko. But it seems to me that neither the power nor the political agenda should influence the situation of a Church in a country and interfere in her internal life. The more so that these politicians do not confess Orthodoxy even nominally.

The Ukrainian authorities make no secret of the fact that autocephaly for them is a political task. P. A. Poroshenko said it in clear voice on several occasions. The canonical Church in Ukraine is subjected to political and administrative pressure, as discriminatory bills aimed against her are registered in the parliament; her churches are captures; her clergy and faithful are beat up by members of radical organizations. But the Ukrainian church problem is, first of all, an internal problem of healing the schism and restoring the unity of the Church. It can be done only by the Church herself – politicians are helpless. The politicization of church life only divides people ever deeper.

- You have stated that a possible granting of autocephaly to the Ukrainian Church will bring about a schism within Orthodoxy. How are we to understand that? The 1054 schism was caused mostly by dogmatic differences between the Old and the New Rome. Are there any conditions of this kind today?

- As for the events of the Great Schism, the doctrinal differences between East and West went side by side with jurisdictional ones. Theological disputes did take place even before 1054 and continued after it. However, the final rupture happened already after the Crusades when the popes of Rome began establishing parallel Latin sees in the East and installing their bishops to them in spite of the fact that there already was an Orthodox hierarchy there. It is precisely what made the schism an accomplished fact and eliminated the possibility for dialogue. In our time, we see new attempts to establish a parallel hierarchy in the territory of Local Churches and hear the allegations that one autocephalous Church can have exclusive powers over other Churches. I do not wish to predict further developments but there are every reason to fear that if the project for Ukrainian autocephaly is carried through, it will mean a tragic and possibly irretrievable schism of the whole Orthodoxy.

- The Ecumenical Patriarchate believes that autocephaly will help heal the local schism which has existed among the Orthodox faithful in Ukraine for thirteen years now and that the Moscow Patriarchate has failed to settle it for these years and that it allowed to prolong it for so long and take a gigantic scale. Is it really so?

- The church canons provide for only one way to healing a schism – repentance and return to the Local Church the unity with which was broken. In case of Ukraine, it is in the Russian Orthodox Church, not the Patriarchate of Constantinople that a schism was perpetrated, and for this reason, any attempt to heal a schism bypassing the Russian Church is outside the canonical domain.

It should be taken into account that ignoring sacred canons shakes up the whole system of the church organism. Schismatics in other Local Churches are well aware that if autocephaly is given to the Ukrainian schismatics, it will be possible to repeat the same scenario anywhere. That is why we state that autocephaly in Ukraine will not be 'the healing of the schism' but its legalization and encouragement.

As far as our Church is concerned, she has never given up her attempts to heal the schism in Ukraine on canonical principles. The latest testimony to it is the appeal of the Metropolitan Filaret Denisenko of Kiev, which he sent less than a year ago to the Bishops' Council of the Russian Orthodox Church with a request for forgiveness. That was surely preceded by a dialogue and negotiations.

It is necessary to understand that the schism of Ukrainian Orthodoxy was artificially inspired in the early 90th of the 20th century by then secular authorities of the country. All these years it has existed as exclusively a political project and supported by nationalist political forces in Ukraine. In doing so, they stopped at nothing. There are at least two schismatic hierarchs who died in very strange circumstances literary on threshold of thier return to the church fold, which they had already resolved to do. Their destiny created an atmosphere of fear among many who wished to reconcile with the Church. Most probably, the same reason explains the strange behavior of the leader of the schismatics Denisenko, who, as was mentioned above, went to meet the Church half way, suddenly, within a few hours, changed his position and denied all this steps towards reconciliation. Anyway, we are not to blame for the failure of that attempt, just as many other. The fault lies with all those who support the ideology of schism.

Thirty years is a long time, of course. But we will not forget that some church divisions continued even considerably longer and then were still overcome. So, there are no reasons to lose hope, under the conditions, of course, that all the Local Churches will act in solidarity in face of a schism, not ceasing to manifest the unity of the body of the Church of Christ.

- **Apparently, the Ecumenical Patriarchate is determined to take the path of granting autocephaly to the Ukrainian Church. Two exarchs have already been sent to promote a normal completion of this process. What will be the further steps of the Moscow Patriarchate?**

- We consider the appointment of exarchs of the Patriarchate of Constantinople to Ukraine as an invasion of this Church in the canonical territory of the Moscow Patriarchate, which is a grave violation of church law.

The Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church has appealed to the Primates of Local Orthodox Church to hold a pan-Orthodox discussion on the Ukrainian problem. I know that this appeal has been met with a response from Primates. We are still ready for dialogue. And we will use every opportunity for explaining patiently to our opponents the tragic danger of the steps they are taking in Ukraine. Reluctant as I am to speak about it, but if these steps lead to entering into communion with the schismatics, we will have to rupture fully the Eucharistic communion with the Patriarchate of Constantinople.

- The Orthodox flock in the whole world are following the developments in the Ukrainian problem with evident concern. Through centuries the Ecumenical and the Moscow Patriarchates have walked hand in hand every time overcoming arising difficulties. Is not what unites you bigger and firmer that what disunites you?

- The Lord Jesus Christ said to His disciples, *Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt among yourselves, and be at peace with each other* (Mk. 9:50). We have always believed and continue to believe that the Holy Orthodox faith uniting our Churches will ultimately prevail over the present differences, which have been brought about by attempts at the interference of the powers of this world in church life. Nevertheless, the preservation of our common Orthodox witness demands common efforts today in the name of the maintenance of the old canonical order, which, to our great grief, is being destroyed now by unilateral actions of the Patriarchate of Constantinople.

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