



Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk answers questions from rememberrussia.ru

On February 17, 2012, rememberrussia.ru published an interview of Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, head of the Moscow Patriarchate's department for external church relation, in which he spoke about the church work to cooperate with and support expatriates living in the far-abroad countries and about dialogue with international organizations concerning the persecution of Christians in various parts of the world.

Q. His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, speaking during the celebrations marking the 65th anniversary of the Department for External Church Relations, stressed that at the present stage the Church 'has an enormous strata to work with, which is our compatriots'. What is done by the DECR to support our expatriates and what can be expected in the future?

A. The supreme authority of the Russian Orthodox Church has instructed the Department for External Church Relations to carry out cooperation with and support for our expatriates living in the far-abroad countries.

Here in Moscow we do all we can to guide and adjust the work of all the concerned church and state structures engaged in supporting expatriates. I would like to speak briefly about the work carried out by the Department. First of all, among our partners in the task of support of our expatriates the important one is Russia's Ministry for Foreign Affairs. It has become a good tradition for the Department and the Ministry's department for work with expatriates to hold round-table conferences on cooperation between the Russian Church and expatriates living in various parts of the world. In 2009, such a conference took place in Brussels; it gathered together clergy and laity from European countries. In 2010, a meeting took place between clergy and representatives of expatriate organizations in Latin America. Last December, a round-table conference was held in Beijing; it was attended by people from the Asian region.

Considerable and fruitful work has been carried out together with the Russian World Foundation. We seek to give support to applicants whose projects are of ecclesial and public significance.

In recent times, we have developed cooperation with other structures concerned, such as the Federal Agency for the CIS, Expatriates and International Humanitarian Cooperation, Moscow Government, Moscow House of the Expatriate, St. Andrew the-First-Called Foundation, Solzhenitsyn House of the Russian Diaspora, Jordan Foundation for Aid to the Cadets, Commission for Coordination and Cooperation with Expatriates under the United Russia Party Presidium.

Among the important results of the joint efforts of the Church and state in supporting expatriates was the Law on Amendments to the Federal Law on the Policy of the State with Regard to Expatriates signed by President Medvedev in July 2010. For the first time, through the common church-state efforts, the role of religious organizations in the task of giving spiritual support to expatriates was legalized and the work of religious organizations was described as socially significant.

As far as prospects for church work to support expatriates is concerned, the DECR sees as its basic task to deepen cooperation between all parties concerned and to implement, together with governmental and public structures, the projects which promote consolidation between expatriates.

Q. Many of our Orthodox compatriots live abroad (both as a result of the collapse of the USSR and due to migration processes). Tell us please about the efforts made by the DECR to increase the number of parishes and institutions of the Moscow Patriarchate abroad. What has been achieved and what is planned by the DECR?

A. The increase in the number of our compatriots abroad has resulted in an increase in the number of church structures outside the canonical territory of the Moscow Patriarchate. At present, we have at our disposal over 400 parishes in 52 countries in the far abroad, this not counting the parishes of the Russian Church Outside Russia. The geography of our parishes is vast. It includes countries with Christian tradition in which Christianity is part of the national culture and identity, first of all in Europe and in the American continent. But our Church also has parishes in the countries where Christianity comprises a minority. Among them are Thailand, Mongolia, India, Nepal, Iran, UAE, and many others.

I would like to say that in 2009 the terms of reference of the synodal structures of the Russian Orthodox Church changed. The Department for External Church Relations was oriented more on the work with foreign countries to become actually an analogue of a secular ministry for foreign affairs. The DECR's terms of reference came to include, among other things, cooperation and work with expatriates, while parishes of the Russian Church in the far-abroad countries came under the jurisdiction of a specially established body, the Moscow Patriarchate Office for Institutions Abroad which is accountable directly to His Holiness the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia.

Q. Along with the pastoral care of expatriates, there is also a need to develop the parish public life. What areas does the DECR see in the task of rallying expatriates and supporting their Orthodox identity?

A. Church parishes, being small islands of Holy Russia in foreign lands, become natural centers of the religious and cultural life of our brothers and sisters. At parishes people can worship together, talk at a tea hour about their pressing problems, initiate contacts. It should be noted that today we see the development of not only religious but also social activity of our parishes. And this, in the first place, is a result of the appearance of new people.

The cast of mind of today's expatriates is changing. Among them there are ever more young and energetic people capable of developing parish life through their own efforts. The Church, on her part, seeks to send to foreign parishes young pastors capable of stirring up our communities to activity.

Parishes today exert considerable efforts to help expatriates to organically enter the social environment of their host country while seeking to preserve their religious and cultural identity. Parishes seek to establish Sunday schools and to help their compatriots master the vernacular, to find a job, to receive advice concerning legal and social matters.

It seems necessary to me that we should give special attention to this kind of parish work, which is of great importance for consolidating our diaspora. I believe this consolidation to be a very important task. First, for expatriates living in the far abroad, a consolidated diaspora helps to acquire quite a different weight in the local environment. Secondly, a strong diaspora is a serious resource for our own country as well since in expatriate communities there are people with a very pro-active stand in life and their skills can serve our Motherland.

Q. What is the state of affairs with regard to information resources (radio, television, printed and electronic mass media) of the Russian Church's dioceses and parishes abroad?

A. Russian Orthodox communities abroad have never been as rich as to afford TV channels of their own. At the same time, many of them have sought as much as they can to engage in information work. Diocesan and parochial media have made a considerable contribution to the consolidation of expatriates from historical Rus'.

The first printed editions appeared at a very early stage in the Orthodox Russian diaspora. These were newspapers, magazines, parish sheets. Some of them were published for decades, others came out for a short period of time, but all played their role in strengthening the ties of Russian émigrés with the Church and one another.

In our time, many magazines and newspapers are published in other countries by dioceses and parishes of the Moscow Patriarchate. Suffice it to mention such good and favoured publications as 'Sourozh' magazine in Great Britain, 'Northern Messenger' in Scandinavia, Messenger of the Diocese of Chersonese' in France, 'the Light of Orthodoxy' in Czechia.

A completely new situation has developed with the emergence of the Internet. Now many dioceses, representations, parishes and other institutions of the Russian Church abroad have websites giving prompt information about the latest events in the church life abroad.

Parish websites are maintained not only in Russian, but also in the languages of the country in which a particular parish is located. These editions also serve to introduce the local population to the Russian church tradition. I would like to mention among them the resources of the Patriarchal Parishes in the USA, Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem, Russian Church Representation in Strasbourg. A special place is occupied by the resources of the Russian Church Outside Russia.

Q. What are the main topics and thrusts of the DECR's dialogue with international organizations, such as the UN, UNESCO and others? Are there any practical results of this cooperation?

A. The dialogue with inter-governmental organizations, which we have actively maintained in recent times, is conditioned by the fact that an increasing number of decisions have been made on the international level which are a matter of concern for believers. The UN and other organizations have spoken out on human rights, family relations, culture of the humanity, dialogue of civilizations, the ethics of scientific research, education and bringing up and many other problems. As a rule, this stand is viewed as the expression of the will of all the nations or a majority of them. However, in fact the opinion of believers, both Orthodox and people of other traditional religions, has seldom been reflected in such documents. For this reason we work to build dialogue with international organizations so that the views of religious people could be given more consideration.

This cooperation can be described as fruitful already now. For instance, in 2009 and 2011, the UN

Human Rights Council adopted resolutions on Encouraging Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms through a Better Understanding of the Traditional Values of Humanity, which stressed the role of family, community and society in asserting and communicating the values of freedom, dignity and responsibility. In 2010, the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly in its resolution reaffirmed the rights of doctors to refuse to perform abortion on the grounds of conscience. These are only a few examples of adopted documents reflecting the position of Christians and people of other traditional religions.

It is my conviction that our dialogue with inter-governmental organizations will enable us to create a space for international communication in which traditional values characteristic of most of the world religions are recognized and taken into account.

It is a common knowledge that the DECR has maintained regular interaction with governmental and public institutions in the countries belonging to the canonical jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church, giving special attention to contacts with structures responsible for work with expatriates. What are the major problems with regard to expatriates as the DECR sees them and what ways of settling them does it propose?

Speaking about problems and difficulties, it is necessary to point to the disunity of our expatriates. It is a result of various factors existing in the Russian diaspora. Today's community of expatriates is quite heterogeneous, has many faces and it is poly-ethnic. People of different emigration waves, specialists and contract workers, students, political asylum seekers have little in common. They do not mix much because of different interests, points of view, ways of thinking, attitudes to particular problems, life plans and sometimes mutual enmity. There is no unity in the general format of the Russian-speaking community. For all the differences in culture, traditions, background, the main thing that unites expatriates is the common historical Motherland and in most cases the Orthodox faith and the Russian language.

The assimilation of expatriates is another serious challenge. Developing this topic, I would like first of all to thank people of the first wave of the Russian emigration who have preserved the Russian language, the faith of their forefathers and love of their historical Motherland in the gravest possible economic and political situations. It should be mentioned that the third generation born in these families sometimes speak a better Russian than those of the third wave of our emigres. Regrettably, among the latter you will often see people, especially young ones, who admire their acquired accent. Sometimes even at home they refuse to speak Russian, which ultimately leads to the loss of cultural identity.

In order to help resolve these problems it is necessary for the Church, state, society and expatriates to take joint efforts for consolidating our brothers and sisters so that they may preserve their religious,

linguistic and cultural identity and consolidate their relations with the Motherland.

Q. How does the DECR participate in developing cooperation between the civil societies in various countries? What has been achieved on this way?

A. Dialogue with the civil society is one of the important areas of our work. It is one of the missions that the Church fulfils in the world. The complexity here is that this mission just as any other presupposes communication not only with believers but also with non-religious people. It places on us an additional responsibility. In this situation, our important task is to find topics for dialogue which could be relevant, understandable and interesting not only for us but also for our interlocutors. Sometimes the sphere of our relations with the civil society in foreign countries involves proponents of aggressive secularism. In this situation, the most important thing for us is to advocate our own view of social development and the presence of the religious dimension in the social environment. We look for natural allies among organizations of traditional nature with whom we could act together. It is through such cooperation that we can make our vision of today's situation known to society. It is very important for us that cooperation should be developed with religious communities, public organizations, academic and business communities as well as individuals in realizing joint projects because through this we can strengthen and promote Christian values in the world.

I can cite as an activity in this area the Russian-German forum of the civil societies 'The St. Petersburg Dialogue'. The Church's participation in the work of this forum enables representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church and church communities in Germany to discuss problems common for both countries and to find ways of their solution. Another important platform is the Russian-Italian dialogue forum of the civil societies. I should also mention the forum 'Russia-Korea Dialogue' which began last year.

Q. It is known that in some countries there are cases of discrimination against Christians and attempts to oust the norms of Christian tradition from public life. How does the DECR defend the rights of Christians and oppose these negative tendencies?

A. Today, cases of violation of the rights of Christians have become frequent in the European continents as well as in some regions in the Middle East, Africa, Central and Southern Asia. Regrettably, these are not individual incidents but a steady tendency.

It should be noted that the discrimination against Christians vary from country to country. Thus, in Iraq,

Egypt, Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, Indonesia, Nigeria and a number of other countries in the Middle East, Africa and Asia, our brothers and sisters in faith are subjected to persecution and violence based on intolerance and extremism, while in Europe, which has been Christian from the time immemorial, they are driven away from public life and deprived of the right to criticize amoral things under the pretext of tolerance.

The Department for External Relations sees the defence of the rights of Christians as a central direction of its work. Our representatives address this problem during meetings and conferences, underscoring its importance in their contacts with international organizations. On May 30, 2011, the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church issued a Statement concerning the growing manifestations of Christianophobia in the world in which the Church clearly formulated her position and called upon the world community to develop 'a comprehensive and effective mechanism of the protection of Christians and Christian communities'.

With the blessing of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, an international conference on Freedom of Faith: the Problem of Discrimination against Christians was held from November 30 to December 1, 2011, in Moscow to become the first issue activity to be held by the Russian Orthodox Church on this matter.

On February 8, 2012, during the meeting of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin with leaders of traditional confessions in Russia, I asked him to make the defence of Christians in the countries where they are subjected to persecution one of the major vectors in Russia's foreign policy. 'Have no doubt that it will be so', the prime minister replied.

I believe the political support and economic aid to these countries can be given only if they observe the rights and freedoms of Christians.

I hope that our efforts will be supported by other states and the followers of all the traditional religions and will lead to concrete measures aimed to improve the situation of Christians.

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