



‘Diplomacy is driven by mission’ – Metropolitan Hilarion’s interview to NG-Religii

DECR Chairman Metropolitan Hilarion speaks about traditions of church diplomacy and international agenda in an interview to journalists of NG-Religii supplement to Nezavisimaya Gazeta, Andrey Melnikov and Anton Kurilovich (NG-Religii, 3 August 2011).

Q. Your Eminence, the Russian Church’s diplomacy amounts to ages and has an enormous experience. How would you describe the distinction of church diplomacy and how does it differ from the diplomacy of a state?

A. Church diplomacy sets itself the task to represent and protect the interests of the Church, while the diplomacy of a state protects the interests of that state in dialogue with parties to international relations. In this respect they are similar. The diplomacy of a state is essentially based on a pragmatic approach to foreign relations. It should ensure a favourable external background for its country and an enduring international peace. On the other hand, the foreign policy of a state may sometimes become hostage to the regime and pursue dubious political aims.

But the Church as a participant in international relations unites people of different cultures and nationalities who share the same faith. And the principal task of the Church in her relations with the external world is to bear witness to the Truth of Christ. It is in fact for this aim that we enter into external church contacts and cooperation with other religions, governments and international and non-governmental organizations. Witness to the faith is also expressed in the Church’s stand on topical issues on the global agenda and in the area of interreligious relations.

The Church teaches to respect the dignity of the human personality endowed with freedom and ability to

discern the moral values which are called to prevent evil and falsehood from prevailing in the world. Therefore, in our external relations we consistently stand for a due regard of ethical norms in international relations. Traditional morality, which can become the only basis for people's peaceful coexistence in a poly-cultural society, excludes moral indifference, egoism, consumerism and the like. Our priority external policy task is to bring this attitude home to as many people as possible.

Q. How far do the DECR staff follow the traditions of church diplomacy? Is it possible to speak of the Byzantine style in the DECR's work?

A. The age-old traditions of church diplomacy are built on St. Paul's words: 'Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace' (Eph. 6:14-15). Throughout centuries, Russian church diplomacy consolidated and continues to consolidate the unity of Universal Orthodoxy, maintained and continues to maintain relations with other Christian confessions and communities of people of other religions and has played a special role in settling contradictions and alleviating conflicts between civilizations, thus fulfilling peacemaking functions.

For some reason Western Europeans has got accustomed to describe not quite honest methods in diplomacy as Byzantine style. In the history of Byzantium such diplomatic ways were used sometimes but they were also used by a great number of other states. I see no grounds for ascribing some special perfidy or subtlety to statesmen of the Roman Empire from which Old Russia adopted the basic traditions of statehood. I believe it is one of the clichés used by the Western civilizations.

Q. In the past centuries, Churches used to build their cooperation unhurriedly. In our days, church negotiators move around the world swiftly by plane. How does this increased fastness of living influence the nature of decisions made?

A. Tradition is continuity of experience handed down from generation to generation. Any rejection of this continuity means not only a rupture with the past but also a certain radical transformation of the present, which will inevitably affect the future. And the Church is very conservative in this respect. She values both her past and her present. Her future grows from them. Reforms in the Church may have to do only with her external forms but never with the essence of her life. Traditions of local or temporal nature however may change. The Church is open to various aspects of people's cultural life because she exists and works in diverse cultural contexts, setting forth her teaching in a different language and on different stages in the development of the human community. Therefore, the basic principles of church diplomacy do not depend on such things as horses being replaced by planes or goose quills by notebooks. The combination of healthy conservatism and openness to modernity on all the stages of her historical life is what has helped the Church to exercise, among other things, her external church relations.

Q. How much the DECR resorts to the assistance of Russia's Foreign Ministry in her work, for instance, in protecting the interests of Christians in Islamic countries?

A. You have touched upon a very burning issue concerning the situation of Christians in countries where they are a minority. Christian communities have been present in these regions for centuries and despite their difficult situation they have managed to preserve their faith and cultural identity. In recent decades however, Christians have become the most oppressed and persecuted religious community in the world, and in some Middle East regions their number has considerably decreased. According to some estimates, nearly 100 million Christians are persecuted annually in various countries of the world. This is why we have engaged in active cooperation with national and international structures including Russia's Foreign Ministry to change the situation of Christians for the better. For instance, one of the effective means here may lie in raising the problem of Christians when decisions are made to provide economic or other aid to a country. It is not a universal method of course since many countries of the Arab world are themselves financial donors. Nevertheless, relations of confidence that Russian diplomacy has established with Arab countries in last decades can become a good foundation for discussing the protection of Christians.

Q. What instruments of cooperation do church diplomats have at their disposal? Have they ever managed to settle conflicts through their own religious channels when state diplomacy proved powerless?

A. I will cite a recent example. On July 26, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia met with Catholicos-Patriarch Iliya II of All Georgia in Kiev. The absence of diplomatic relations between Russia and Georgia was not an obstacle for that meeting. On the contrary, as Patriarch Kirill noted, contacts between the Russian and Georgian Churches have become even more intensive than before, which makes up to a certain extent the absence of relations on the political level. In our view, it is a guarantee that good relations between our states will be restored.

History knows of many cases where church diplomacy proved to be extremely effective in a situation of interstate difficulties. Suffice it to remember the long-standing representation of the interests of the Russian Empire by the Russian Orthodox Mission in Peking or the work of the Russian Orthodox Mission in Jerusalem in the situation of absence of diplomatic relations between the USSR and Israel. For all that the peacemaking potential of church diplomacy remains unrealized in many ways. The awareness of this by the Russian foreign policy department grows with each year. Evidence to it is the fruitful work of the Group for Cooperation between the Russian Church and the Russian Ministry for Foreign Affairs. The faithful of traditional religions have many things in common, and when the resources of confidence between politicians and diplomats are exhausted, they are able to preserve

friendship and mutual respect. A testimony to this is our good long-standing contacts with theologians and scholars in Iran, a country being actually in international isolation.

We hold direct discussions with Muslim leaders concerning the problems of the Christian minority. Early in June I visited Egypt and met with the rector, professors and students of the oldest Islamic university Al-Azhar. My address, in which I spoke about the situation of Christians in that country, was received with great understanding and concern. It is another indication of the ability of church diplomats to search for a solution of problems also in a situation where secular diplomacy has proved powerless.

Q. When you think a Pan-Orthodox Council may take place?

A. Mutual relations between Local Orthodox Churches are on the rise today, characterized by growing trust and cooperation. In the recent years, a considerable progress has been made in preparations for the Pan-Orthodox Council. It is impossible to foretell the exact date of the Council. It will take place when Orthodox Churches agree on the items of the agenda published as far back as the 1960s. In discussing these items at inter-Orthodox preparatory commissions and Pan-Orthodox Pre-Council Conferences, Local Churches have managed to come to consensus on most of them but not all as yet. At present, the Local Orthodox Churches should decide together whether to hold a Council on the full agenda or only those items on which an agreed position has already been reached by the Churches. The latter option will clearly draw nearer the date of the Pan-Orthodox Council.

On the other hand, not all the items put on the agenda in the last century are relevant in our days, for instance, the struggle against racial discrimination. At the same time, the Church is facing a whole number of new challenges requiring urgent discussion and decisions. Among them some issues of bioethics as well as problems brought about by the crisis of family values in the modern society. It would be worthwhile to discuss these issues during the forthcoming Pan-Orthodox Council.

Q. Is it possible to say that relations with the Vatican have become a priority in the DECR's work in recent times?

A. The priority in the work of the Department for External Church Relation is in the first place the development of the Russian Orthodox Church's relations with Local Orthodox Churches. It can be noted however that for the last five years there has been a positive dynamic in the development of relations with the Holy See. Today we become ever more aware of the need to unite efforts in face of such challenges of today as liberal secularism, negative aspects of the globalization, the family crisis and the eroded foundation of social ethics. Especially urgent today in the light of recent events in the Middle East is the need to oppose the discrimination of Christians and various manifestations of religious intolerance in many countries of the world.

Q. Recently you have met with ex-president George Bush. Tell us please what benefit can be drawn by the Moscow Patriarchate from cooperation with the influential community of conservative Protestants in the USA?

A. My unofficial meeting with George Bush is only one of many episodes in our cooperation with American Christian conservatives. As is known, the ex-president himself 'found Jesus' when he was 40 under the influence of preacher Billy Graham who helped him to change his former way of life. George Bush became close friends with the Evangelicals. They promoted his political career. Mr. Bush said on several occasions that his aim was 'to propagate the biblical vision of the world'. I would not like to give in this context a political assessment to the political work of George Bush Jr. while he was president of the USA. I would like to say something different, namely, that we are in solidarity with the Evangelicals in their struggle against the liberalization of Christianity, in their advocacy of traditional moral norms. They have consistently come out against the so-called same-sex marriages and ordination of homosexuals. In this sense, the Evangelicals can be said to be defenders of Christian morals. At the same time, our understandings of the faith in Christ and of the nature of the Church radically differ. Photos by the Patriarchal Press Service

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