



Metropolitan Hilarion: There are no grounds to expect the Pan-Orthodox Council to run into surprises

Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations, made a journey to the Middle East in the end of August. He visited three ancient Local Churches and met with their Primate. Upon returning to Moscow, he spoke about his visit to "Interfax-Religion."

Q. – You have completed your journey to the Middle East countries and Turkey and visited three Patriarchates. What was the purpose of this trip?

A. – The trip was undertaken with the blessing of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia. His Holiness and the Holy Synod blessed me to visit the heads of the Local Orthodox Churches on a regular basis and to hold consultations on the matters of inter-Orthodox relations and topical problems of the life of the Orthodox Church at present. It was necessary to meet with the Primate of the three ancient Patriarchates – of Constantinople, Antioch, and Jerusalem.

Current political events in the Middle East can seriously complicate the life of Christians in the region. It is not fortuitous that the problems of Christians there have been scrutinized by the heads of the Churches in the Middle East. On August 1, the Primate of the Churches of Antioch, Jerusalem, and Cyprus and a representative of the Patriarchate of Alexandria met in Jordan. On August 23, a similar meeting took place in Cyprus. Another meeting on the Middle East problems will be chaired by Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople in Istanbul on September 1.

The Russian Orthodox Church has never been indifferent to the problems of our Orthodox brothers in

the Middle East and has expressed its concern for the situation of Christians in the Middle East and in other regions of the world in the Statement of the Holy Synod of May 30.

Q. – How did the Primates with whom you met receive this Statement?

A. – I gave the text of the Statement translated into different languages, including the Greek and the Arabic, to the three Primates. They received it with gratitude, and the Patriarch of Antioch said that it would be published in the Orthodox media in Syria and Lebanon.

Q. – What is the attitude to the situation of Christians in the Middle East of the leader of the Palestinian National Authority Mahmoud Abbas with whom you met last Sunday?

A. – As a leader in the region with the predominant Arab population where Muslims and Christians live side by side, Mahmoud Abbas knows these problems very well and hopes that events, like the recent ones in Iraq and Egypt, will not take place in other countries of the region. It is known that the situation of Christians has deteriorated considerably after the regimes in these countries have been overthrown with outside help. For instance, a million and a half Christians lived in Iraq earlier; there are less than a half of them there at present. The life of Christians is under constant threat, and many are forced to leave cities and towns where their fellow believers used to live for many centuries.

Q. – Are more frequent meetings of the Primates linked with current political circumstances in the region? Will they discuss at the forthcoming meeting in Istanbul only regional problems or also general Orthodox problems?

A. – I have put this question to the three Patriarchs. His Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew answered that the meeting will be dedicated to the Middle East problems in the first instance. Patriarch Ignatios of Antioch and Patriarch Theophilos of Jerusalem confirmed these words. Patriarch Theophilos added that as the Primates meet they can discuss any issues of interest.

It is hard to say at present whether the Pan-Orthodox Council will be discussed at their meeting. I believe, however, that questions of an inter-Orthodox nature should be discussed by all Local Orthodox Churches in order to avoid giving an impression that a group of Churches tries to make decisions on behalf of all Local Churches in their absence.

Q. – Did you cover the Pan-Orthodox Council at the meetings with the Patriarchs of Antioch and Jerusalem?

A. Yes. It was important to discuss the possible configuration of the Council, its topics, representation of

the Churches, and a method of decision-making. At present, the only method of decision-making in the inter-Orthodox cooperation is consensus. It is on consensus that a possibility of cooperation among the Local Orthodox Churches is based. It is this method that helps resolve emerging issues in the spirit of brotherly love and reach agreement on the matters that raise controversy.

Certain voices have been raised recently for giving up this method and replacing it with decision-making by simple majority. However, this drastic change in the work of inter-Orthodox bodies could entail grave consequences: if even one Church opposes a decision and her opinion is disregarded at voting, this would inevitably cause division in the family of Orthodox Churches. If this division is not overcome at the preparatory stage, it will surface at the Pan-Orthodox Council. Therefore, it is impossible to offer any other method today except consensus.

Q. – Your Eminence, what do you think of the norms of representation at the Pan-Orthodox Council? How many hierarchs will gather – hundreds or dozens of them?

A. – I believe that this issue must be discussed by the Pan-Orthodox Preparatory Commission. As we want to convene a true Pan-Orthodox Council, I think that all diocesan hierarchs should be invited so that each local Church is represented by its bishop at the Council as it was in the epoch of Ecumenical Councils. The total number of diocesan bishops of all Local Orthodox Churches is some five hundred, and it seems to me realistic to bring five hundred persons together. However, in case it turns out impossible for whatever reason to convene such a representative forum, then the representation of the Church should be proportional to its size.

There are mechanisms of inter-Orthodox cooperation at present at which each Church has one or two representatives. But if we talk of the Russian Orthodox Church, it should be understood that the number of its faithful is larger than that of all other Local Orthodox Churches combined. The size of the Church should be taken into account when a quota of representation at the Pan-Orthodox Council is set up.

Q. – What do you think of the venue and date of the Council?

A. – His Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew expressed his wish to hold the Council in Istanbul, in the Agia Eirene church at which the Second Ecumenical Council took place in 381. I think that the Council can be held in the foreseeable future if the matters of representation, protocol, and agenda are thoroughly discussed and settled.

Q. – Is it possible to say that the Moscow Patriarchate supports the convening of the Council provided the agreement on all the problems is reached?

A. – We come out for the convening of the Council because it is necessary to present the single and agreed voice of Orthodoxy in the face of the challenges the Orthodox Church is encountering. Therefore, it is very important to surmount all differences at the preparatory stage so that the Council becomes a factor of unity rather than a factor of division. It is absolutely necessary to have consensus as the only method of decision-making as is common in inter-Orthodox cooperation.

Q. – Certain representatives of church public circles would say that the Eighth Ecumenical Council will revoke decisions of the Seven Councils...

A. – These fears are ungrounded as the Council will not take any decision that has not been made public by the Preparatory Commission during the last fifty years. Its decisions are known and are not subject to secrecy. The documents and minutes of the Commission's meetings are available to all who wish to see them. Many documents were published in "The Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate" in the 1970-89s.

Moreover, if the decision of convening the Pan-Orthodox Council is taken – and I would like to underscore that this decision can only be made by all Local Orthodox Churches – the topics discussed at the pre-council conferences during these fifty years will be scrutinized once again. Necessary corrections will be made with the changed circumstances taken into account. The decisions to be taken will be known in advance. There are no grounds to expect the Council to run into surprises.

Q. – Can one say that the adherence to the principle of consensus excludes decisions that would run counter to the church tradition as certain believers fear?

A. – Yes, it excludes such a decision, as the principle of consensus presupposes the agreement of all Churches with the taken decision. If one Local Orthodox Church does not agree, it has grounds for disagreement, and these grounds are found in its tradition.

I should say that there are no doctrinal differences or disagreement in canon law among the Local Orthodox Churches. All the difficulties we encounter concern political issues that can be resolved either in dialogue between the two Local Churches or on the inter-Orthodox level. As to the ten topics included in the agenda of the Pan-Orthodox Council fifty years ago, agreement has been reached on eight topics, while the remaining two are of a kind of technical nature. They are the signing of a Tomos on autocephaly in case it is granted to this or that Church, and the order of the Churches in official lists, that is, the diptychs. I would like to emphasize that these issues are not of doctrinal nature and can be settled even after the Pan-Orthodox Council.

Q. - Representatives of non-canonical groups in Ukraine not in communion with any of the Local

Orthodox Churches expect that the Council and even the meeting of the five heads of the Middle East Churches will recognize their autocephaly and include their names in the diptyches.

A. - The problem of schism is a very painful problem. Schism is a wound on the body of the Church. Certainly, the Church should always exert efforts to heal schisms. The Church calls people who consciously or unconsciously have lapsed into schism to return to her bosom and always awaits them with open arms.

I believe that the Pan-Orthodox Council will be able to discuss these problems and take decisions that would help our brothers and sisters who have lapsed into schism to return to the bosom of the Church. However, I do not think that the meeting of the Primates of the Middle East Churches, which will be of consultative nature and dedicated to the problems of the region, can take any decision on the Ukrainian problems. Ukraine is not the Middle East. The meeting will be regional and dedicated to the regional problems.

Q. - You have officiated at the divine service on the Feast of the Dormition at the Convent of St. Mary Magdalene that belongs to the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR). How were you welcomed and what can you say about cooperation between the Moscow Patriarchate and the ROCOR in the Holy Land?

A. - Mother Hegumeness Elizabeth and the sisters of the Convent of St. Mary Magdalene in Gethsemane welcomed me very warmly, and I celebrated the Divine Liturgy there. On the feast of the Dormition of the Most Holy Mother of God I prayed with a special feeling there where the Mother of God was buried and where our Lord Jesus Christ prayed to His Heavenly Father before His suffering on the Cross and death.

Cooperation between the ROCOR and the Moscow Patriarchate is developing properly. There are parallel structures of the Moscow Patriarchate and the ROCOR in some places, including the Holy Land. From the canonical point of view, it can be seen as an anomaly, but this situation has emerged from the tragic events of the post-revolutionary period, while the process of healing the inflicted wounds can take a long time.

A working group has been set up at the request of the ROCOR and by the decision of the Holy Synod. The group will deal with the questions of further cooperation between the ROCOR and the Moscow Patriarchate. I believe that cooperation in the Holy Land can be also discussed if desired.