



Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk: “It is impossible to speak of ‘the recognition of the sacraments’ administered by schismatics”

In an interview to Patriarhia.ru, the head of the Department for External Church Relations, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, sums up the work of the Joint Commission of Orthodox-Catholic Dialogue meeting in Vienna and the Inter-Council Presence’s commission for opposing and overcoming church schisms, and speaks about the state of inter-Christian dialogue today.

- Your Eminence, some participants in the Joint Commission for Orthodox-Catholic Dialogue in Vienna have stated a promising progress made on the way to unity. How far does the Russian Orthodox Church share this assessment?

- In the headings of publications in some mass media concerning the Vienna meeting of the Orthodox-Catholic Theological Commission, the word ‘breakthrough’ flickered, but the participants in the talks themselves sum up the work in more moderate terms. On a proposal of the Orthodox side, the Commission agreed not to give an official status to the draft document prepared earlier. It was deemed reasonable to use this document as a working material for drafting a new document on the theological problems existing in relations between the Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church concerning primacy and conciliarity in the life of the Church.

- What problems remain the most important in the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue at this stage?

- In the 1990s, the Joint Commission adopted important statements on *Unia*, which, as everybody hoped at that time, would finish the long-standing disputes. However, the Greek Catholics refused to accept them as a guide for action. And today we can see a continuation of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church’s expansion into the territory of eastern Ukraine, where Uniatism has never played any significant role whatever. The transfer of the center of the Greek-Catholic Archdiocese from Lvov to Kiev and insistent attempts to obtain the never-existent status of patriarchate for it are eloquent evidence of

their desire to replenish their ranks at the expense of Orthodox believers.

We still believe that only the Greek Catholics' conscious rejection of the expansion policy will make it possible to settle problems which darken the Orthodox-Catholic relations today.

- The Russian Orthodox Church has repeatedly stated that *Unia* remains a major barrier for Orthodox-Catholic dialogue. What do you think of the UGCC's intention to build a church for itself in Odessa?

- It is surprising to see the response of the Greek Catholics who have made such a fuss over the situation in Odessa. Don't they know that the real problems and real violations of the rights of believers take place not in Odessa but, for instance, in Lvov? After the forcible capture of Orthodox churches by the Uniates in the 90s, the then Lvov local authorities did not give a single church to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in the city, nor a plot of land for building it. We hope very much that soon the situation will change, but all these years our diocese of Lvov has had no cathedral. Meanwhile, the number of Ukrainian Orthodox parishioners is incommensurable with the number of Uniates in Odessa. And one should have protested against religious discrimination first of all in those cases where it really takes place, violating the right of a large group of believers at that.

- Your Eminence, you have recently returned from Ukraine, where you attended a meeting of the Inter-Council Presence's commission for opposing and overcoming church schisms. What are the results of its work?

- The Commission has drafted two documents on its work and will submit them to the Inter-Council Presence. One document concerns some measures for overcoming the consequences of the 17th century church division. The second one is about the acceptance of those who come back from schisms to the fold of the Church. Both documents, according to the procedure of the Inter-Council Presence, are closed ones. For this reason I cannot publicize them until they are considered by the presidium and plenary of the Inter-Council Presence and then by a Bishops' Council or the Holy Synod.

- Did you discuss the recognition of 'sacraments' administered by schismatics? What is your attitude to this issue?

- This issue has been repeatedly discussed both in private talks of the Commission members and at the meeting. The Church does not recognize and cannot recognize as grace-giving and salvific any 'sacraments' including Baptism administered in a schism. This is a common point of view confirmed by many testimonies of the church Tradition. 'Recognition of schismatics' sacraments' is an altogether improper expression which can be only misleading. The point here is not a diplomatic manifestation of politeness but attempts to impose on the Orthodox the recognition of a real presence of saving grace outside the Church. For the Church, the authenticity of Sacraments is a matter of salvation. It is impossible and senseless to speak of 'recognition of sacraments' administered by schismatics who stay outside the Church and have no communion with her.

However, as His Beatitude Vladimir, Metropolitan of Kiev and All Ukraine, has stressed, 'the schismatics' return to the saving fold of the Church can put life into their graceless actions'. When schismatics come back to the Church, it is a normal practice to embrace holy Baptism. But if the Church deems it necessary and if it is helpful for healing a schism, she can in some cases provide a different procedure, as was the case on repeated occasions in history.

The Church will never recognize schismatics' ordinations, and all the clergy who come back from a schism should be ordained, though it is not at all necessary to make it in public. As far as the Sacrament of Baptism is concerned, it is impossible to administer it to all the laity coming back from a schism. Indeed, some of them do not even remember in which church they were baptized, canonical or schismatic.

Besides, there are situation where, for instance, a schismatic priest comes back to the Church together with his parishioners. The subsequent 're-baptism' of the parishioners he had baptized earlier cannot be stipulated for his return, just as a 're-marriage' of those whom he had married earlier or 're-funeral' of all the dead over whom the burial service had been said before. It is impossible to force a priest who was now ordained in a canonical Church to return to their parishioners and say to them: 'Everything I have done here for ten (or twenty) years was a deception, and only now I will begin doing everything in the real way'. People will not understand it and will not believe him. For all I know, they can think he decided to get the money for the second time for the sacraments he had already administered.

It is about such situations that it is stated that the Church can breathe a grace-giving power into the graceless actions of the schismatics and to inform with grace what had been only an empty and graceless form. In other words, the question of recognizing schismatics' sacraments is not posed at all out of context of their return from the schism. But the question of a procedure of acceptance from a schism can and must be posed. And here, depending on the situation, various approaches can be applied.

- We hear sometimes the voices of the so-called 'zealots of the purity of Orthodoxy', whose favourite theme is criticism of 'ecumenism' based on conjecture. What does inter-Christian cooperation consist in today?

- The Supreme Authority of the Russian Orthodox Church has repeatedly explained what is understood as inter-Christian cooperation, what aims this cooperation pursues, what results it has brought and can bring to our Church in the future. I believe there is no sense in repeating all that has been said about it, for instance, in the Russian Orthodox Basic Principles of Attitude to Non-Orthodoxy, an official document of the 2000 Bishops' Council.

I would like to mention a different thing. Today, millions of the faithful of the Russian Orthodox Church including Russians, Ukrainians, Byelorussians, Moldovans, have gone to live outside their historical Motherland. It is a sad development in many ways as it involves assimilation, brain drain, etc. But it is a reality existing regardless of its emotional assessment. One can grieve over it as much as one wants but the Church is obliged to help her children to remain Orthodox in an alien milieu.

I wonder whether anyone of the 'zealots' has ever been concerned for the problems of pastoral care of the Russia diaspora? Do the critics of our cooperation with the Catholic Church know who actually provides our compatriots abroad with facilities necessary for services, Sunday schools and for creating an Orthodox environment for fellowship? Many newly-established Orthodox communities abroad use church buildings which have been provided by the non-Orthodox, in the first place, Catholics. When Catholics give the Orthodox an opportunity to pray in the churches which belong to them and do it often gratis, what does it show?

And how many of former Catholics and Protestants have become Orthodox Christians and members of our communities abroad, among other things, as a result of mixed marriages? Do the authors who claim to be the voice of 'conservative church public' know how difficult it is in Western Europe, for instance, to obtain permission for building a church and to negotiate its design with local authorities? And what assistance do Catholic parishes and sometimes even Protestant communities give to our new parishes? And how many of our compatriots who have found themselves in the West in a situation of illegal migrants have managed to obtain the necessary papers and jobs with the help of Catholic and Protestant charities on the request of Russian Orthodox parishes?

- What tasks does our Church face today in the dialogue with Christian Churches in Europe, with other religious communities and socio-political organizations?

- At present, Western Europe is turning into a citadel of aggressive secularism. Our participation in inter-Christian organizations is aimed at fulfilling the concrete practical task to oppose further secularization and to protect by all legitimate means the interest and rights of our flock.

The same can be said about the entrance of Russia and a number of other countries in the post-Soviet space in 'the common European house'. Whether we want it or not, the process is underway, and we cannot pretend we do not see it. Pay attention, active efforts have made recently to adjust our legislation to the European one, in which there are its own advantages and disadvantage. If the Church does not participate in the public discussion on this matter the legislation may prove to acquire more disadvantages than advantages. And the experience of Christian churches in Europe can render us a considerable assistance in this concern.

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