

One Year After Havana – The Dialogue Continues

Interview with Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev * 4th February 2017

You took part in the meeting of Havana, and you even participated in the preparation. What happened on this day – and what is the significance of this event in your opinion?

It was a very cordial and friendly meeting of the two men who had never met before. But what is far more important, it was the first ever meeting of the Pope of Rome with the Patriarch of Moscow.

The first attempt to organize such meeting was made almost twenty years before, in 1997, when Pope John Paul II and Patriarch Alexy II were scheduled to meet in Austria. But the meeting was cancelled because the two sides could not agree on the substance of the common declaration.

In the case of the Havana meeting the text was prepared beforehand, and the two sides were able to agree on all substantial points of the declaration, which made the meeting possible. The Moscow Patriarchate had always stressed that the meeting was necessary not just in order to shake hands and pose in front of the telecameras, but in order to discuss the common challenges that we are facing.

The text of the declaration was prepared in strict confidentiality, but once the substance of it was agreed upon by both sides, it became possible of a concrete date and place.

Why Cuba has been chosen as the place for this meeting?

It was the proposal of Patriarch Kirill, who did not want to meet in Europe, because he believed that the first ever meeting of the Roman Pontiff and the Moscow Patriarch should not have been overshadowed by bitter memories of conflicts between the Catholics and the Orthodox that had unfolded on the European ground.

What has changed since Cuba, and how did the relation between the Churches develop?

Many things have changed, because the meeting gave a new impetus to our relations. We now have closer cooperation on many issues, including the situation in the Middle East, which was the major topic of discussion between the Pope and the Patriarch. We monitor the situation together, we are involved in joint humanitarian actions, we coordinate our efforts with one another. And we have a new spirit of cooperation in various fields, in particular in the field of culture and in the area of student exchange.

You will celebrate the first anniversary of this convergence in Fribourg. What is the role of the small Swiss city in this great history?

Fribourg is a home to a University with strong Catholic roots. Fribourg is well known to both Cardinal Koch, who was a bishop in Switzerland for many years and headed the Swiss Bishops' Conference, and myself, who am a professor at the University. When we began to think of a place in which we can organize some event to mark the anniversary of the historic meeting in Havana, I proposed Fribourg and my proposal was gladly accepted by the Catholic side.

What is your message for today?

The same as the one with which the Common declaration concludes: “Christ is the well-spring of joy and hope. Faith in Him transfigures human life, fills it with meaning. This is the conviction borne of the experience of all those to whom Peter refers in his words: “Once you were ‘no people’ but now you are God’s people; you ‘had not received mercy’ but now you have received mercy” (1 Pet 2:10)”.

There is nothing more important and more attractive that we can offer to modern humanity than Jesus Christ. We must struggle to bring Him to people, to make Him known to the youth, to show that His person and His teaching are no less relevant today than they were two thousand years ago.

It is said that many small rivulets make the great rivers. How will the Churches continue to come closer to one another? And in which way?

We should not haste to overcome our differences in theology and ecclesial administrations. They are numerous and must be carefully discussed by theologians. In these discussions, which are conducted by appropriate theological commissions, we must be honest and must not try to hide our differences or to avoid talking about them. Such painful issues as Uniatism need to be address, together with other issues related to the second millennium of our common existence, when many mistakes were made whose consequences are still in existence.

This honest discussion of our differences should in no way prevent us from acting together for the benefit of our flocks and the entire world in many fields in which our cooperation is timely and necessary. We must make every effort to defend those persecuted Christians of the Middle East who are still trying to stay where they were born and where Christianity had existed for two thousand years. We can develop many other avenues of cooperation and friendship without being unfaithful to our own traditions and without compromising on matters of doctrine and ecclesiology.

The Russian Church is the orthodox Church with the greatest number of believers. What is the significance of the dialogue with the Catholic Church for the inter-Orthodox relations?

As one of the fifteen existing local Orthodox Churches, we participate in the official dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church. But we also have our own bilateral relations with the Roman Catholic Church on different levels, not only on the level of the Pope and the Patriarch, but also on the level of dioceses, monasteries, parishes and individuals. These relations are multifaceted and diverse.

Our celebration in Fribourg on 12 February is one of many events which are happening on a regular basis and deepen our mutual understanding of one another. I hope that by being together and by deliberating on the follow up of the historic meeting between Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill we will further deepen our mutual understanding and pave the way towards many future achievements. May the Lord Jesus Christ help us!