

**September 14<sup>th</sup>**

**Seminar “Monastic Life and Christian Unity”**

**Reflections of the significance of monastic life in light of “Joint Declaration of Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia”**

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The year 2016 has been marked by a historic event, which, no doubt, will be recorded in Church history books: the first ever meeting between the Primate of the Roman Catholic Church Pope Francis and the head of the largest Orthodox national Church Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia. According to both Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Department of External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, and Father Hyacinthe Destivelle, a Dominican friar, who is responsible for relations with the Slavic Orthodox Churches at the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, the meeting was not intended to indicate, much less to resolve any of the “divisive issues”, i.e. theological and doctrinal matters of contention between the Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church.

Nevertheless, as soon as the news about the meeting reaching public on both sides of the confessional divide, we have had a chance to witness something, which, in recent decades, amidst the generally pacifying bilateral conferences and discussions, has not, been seen all that often: a moderate uproar, bringing in question faithfulness to our beliefs as well as the true reasons behind the event.

Apart from the fact that the authors of this critique attack the document for something that it was not intended to be from the very beginning, I would argue that they miss something very important that is at the center of the Joint Declaration and, in fact, pertains to the very nature of Christian – and, more specifically, monastic life. In various forms, this message is mentioned in several parts of the document: for one, we find it in the article 4, which reads:

We thank God for the gifts received from the coming into the world of His only Son. We share the same spiritual Tradition of the first millennium of Christianity. The witnesses of this Tradition are the Most Holy Mother of God, the Virgin Mary, and the saints we venerate.

Among them are innumerable martyrs who have given witness to their faithfulness to Christ and have become the "seed of Christians".

Thus, the Declaration points the source of Christian unity – holiness, which, when practiced, crucifies one's earthly life for the sake of eternal.

"Be ye holy; for I am holy" (1 Peter 1.16) – this is the ultimate calling of the life of a Christian, which for a monastic takes on a special meaning when we continue it with the rest of the phrase of the Leviticus, to which St. Peter refers: "I... have severed you from other people, that ye should be mine" (Lev. 20.26). A monk is a man who has been set apart by the Holy Spirit to relinquish the cares, desires and ambitions of other men to a degree that it is no longer he but Christ Who lives in him – Christ, Who is present in the human history by means of His Mystical Body, the Church. Thus, for the XIX century Russian ascetic, St. Theophan the Recluse, it becomes possible to say: monk is a Church *property*.

"A monk ought by all means to fly from women and bishops". This phrase of St. John Cassian, with which we are all familiar, can be metaphorically interpreted as a call to abandon not only the ordinary forms of human life, but also certain types of life within the Church, which usually express themselves in administrative or academic setting. Thus, if elsewhere the interconfessional dialogue may be developed along the theological, political, social or other lines, a monk makes himself an instrument of this dialogue primarily by embodying holiness within his own life. This is the first and foremost way in which Christ through His Church "appropriates" him – by making him a carrier of His holiness, a living witness of the eternal Truth, that is to say μάρτυρός, a martyr.

A monk, says Thomas Merton, is one who is so intent upon the search for God that he is ready to die in order to see Him. Historically, as we know, monasticism came into being after the end of the Roman persecution of Christians. Given the extremity of the choice that a person makes when becoming a monk, and the hardships of the spiritual battle that he undergoes ever since, monasticism has become known as "bloodless martyrdom". But we can also look at monasticism from the perspective of St. Basil the Great, who says that there would be no wars or violence if only the Christians would live up to their calling. Thus, living holy and sacrificially, a monk through his spiritual endeavor puts a limit to bloodshed.

The history of the Russian Orthodox Church in the XX century has seen thousands and tens of thousands of martyrs. The grace of God and the steadfastness of the Russian faithful, aided by the prayerful and moral support from abroad, raised the Church as well as the country "from under the rubble", to use Solzhenitsyn's

phrase. Today, when the Christian population is exterminated in Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Nigeria, Pakistan, Libya and elsewhere, the life of holiness should become a bloodless replacement to the slaughter of physical life. When the militant secularism makes any traditional value or virtue radically subjective, it is infants that die and families that disintegrate. It is by offering equally radical alternative that we would be able to bring the blurred ideals back into focus. And what is more radical in our Church than monasticism?

Crisis forges unity. And the way to reach it is to be better adherents of our Holy Fathers, embodying in our spiritual life what they have embodied in theirs. It is for this reason that the old ways to reconcile the differences, practiced in regions such as Ukraine, are not applicable. Article 24 of the Declaration says of Catholics and Orthodox: "We are not competitors but brothers". When the values that were preached and practiced by our common predecessors are reaffirmed by either Catholic or Orthodox, both sides are made stronger. When our life is no longer ours, when we have no other interest but the interest of the Church, when we seek nothing other than God, we are united in the Spirit, that had united St. Anthony the Great, St. Benedict or St. John Cassian; than the borders fall and than nothing divides the Egyptian dessert or the Palestine plane from the mountains of Subiaco or the lavender fields of Gaul.

May God be glorified in His saints.

Thank you.