

Notes and Reflections

AN ENCOUNTER BETWEEN FRANCISCO I AND KIRILL I: A SMALL STEP IN AN APPROACH FULL OF UNCERTAINTIES¹

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The first meeting between the Pope and the Patriarch of Moscow and all of Russia held in Havana on 12 February was a historic event, a fact unanimously recognised by all. However, great illusions should not be created as Francisco and Kirill made only small steps in the rapprochement between the two largest Christian churches in an atmosphere of ancient distrust. Using a common allegory found in Russian nature, the head of the Catholic Church and the head of the Orthodox Church began to abruptly tread on a very thin layer of ice covering the lake.

Preparation of the meeting

The preparation of the meeting in Havana was held in the greatest secrecy (a level similar to that of hidden diplomacy), and the event's announcement was made only a few days from its date.

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In June last year, Ilarion Metropolitan, who heads the Section of Patriarchal Relations of Moscow, admitted that this possibility of "an approximation of perspective", but stressed that the meeting should be "carefully prepared" and "take place on neutral grounds" (Ilarion, 2015).

However, such promises had been made before but without any positive result. With much struggled in the normalisation of relations between Orthodox Russians and Catholics, the head of the Roman Catholic Church Pope John Paul II marked a meeting with Alexy II the Patriarch of Moscow and all of Russia in Austria, which subsequently did not occur (Lima, 2016). It took hard work and 20 difficult years of talks so that the dignitaries of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Vatican could meet.

Moscow accused the Catholic Church of developing missionaries (proselytism) in its "canonical territory", i.e. Russia, Belarus and Ukraine, as well as the Greek-Catholic or Uniate Ukrainian Christians, who follow the Eastern rite but recognise the primacy of the Pope in the Christian world, occupied temples belonging to the Russian Orthodox Church.

The second of these problems has not yet found a solution within the Russian Orthodox Church, as a strong opposition to rapprochement with the "heretics" has always existed. Because of this, the meeting was announced only on 5 February, looking to catch his opponents off guard.

The city of Havana was also not chosen by chance. It was hard to find a more neutral place than Cuba. On the one hand, in the Russian geopolitical point of view, this country is still part of its zone of influence and, on the other hand it is part of the Catholic world.

The meeting would not take place in Moscow, because presently it is hard to imagine a visit by a Pope of Rome to Russia. Considering a popular, humble and charismatic figure like Francisco I, it would be a pretext for criticism of the Orthodox clergy and laity, who continue to see the Bishop of Rome as a "heretic".

The meeting also could not be held in the Vatican, because Kirill's trip would certainly be interpreted by the same conservative circles and Russian nationalist as a sign of recognition of the Pope by the Moscow Patriarch as head of the Universal Christian Church.

At the request of the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, the meeting also did not take place in Europe, as it symbolises the division of Christians. It was therefore decided that the meeting should be held in Latin American countries, where Christianity is still an alive and well and is still a key player.

"From the beginning, the Holy Patriarch Kirill did not want the meeting in Europe, precisely because Europe is linked to a heavy history of division and conflict between Christians"

He recognised the Ilarion Metropolitan, Head of International Relations at the Russian Orthodox Church. (Ilarion, 2016)



Further proof that everything was carefully prepared is seen in the Joint Declaration adopted in Havana, where the signature was not of the Pope but the Bishop of Rome. This was extremely important to show that they gathered as two equal parts. (Declaração Conjunta, 2016).

Political motives

The meeting of the Pope and the Russian Patriarch was also of paramount importance to the latter because it was a way for him to affirm the Orthodox world before the Council of the Orthodox Churches, scheduled for June 2016 in Greece to face its main competitor: Bartholomew, Patriarch of Constantinople. The Patriarchate of Moscow was concerned that the latter be received under its Orthodox Church jurisdiction, which included the Russian independents such as Ukraine, Estonia and Finland.

Iegor Kholmogorov, one of the ideologists of Russian nationalism wrote on the subject:

"As for the influence of this meeting on relations within the Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill returned from Cuba as the unconditional leader of the Orthodox world, in fact, its informal leader" (Kholmogorov, 2016).

From the Russian side, it is clear that this meeting was also intended to help reduce the isolation that the Kremlin was facing from Western countries and to improve the image of President Putin, which had suffered due to aggressive foreign policy. The support of such a popular Pope in the Christian world and was of utmost importance in a period of international relations as troubled as the current. In view of the strong dependence of the Russian Orthodox Church on secular power, it is hard to imagine that this meeting took place without the "blessing" of President Putin.

In fact, the preparation of the meeting in Havana was accelerated after the meeting of Francisco with Vladimir Putin, held on 13 June the year before. Three days after the hearing of the Russian leader at the Vatican, the Pope proposed that the Catholic and Orthodox churches begin to celebrate Easter on the same day. Subsequently, there was an increase in contact between representatives of both churches, which flowed to Havana.

It must be noted that the almost all submission of religious power to political power is not a current feature, but has deep historical roots.

The Kievan Rus was baptised in 980 by Prince Vladimir the Great. From that date, the Russian Orthodox Church was headed by metropolitans who were subject to the Patriarch of Constantinople. During the process of political centralisation, the Russian tsars considered the creation of the post of Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church with only formal dependence on Constantinople to be necessary. This policy was based on the ideology of "Moscow - The Third Rome", i.e the idea of Moscow as a Byzantium successor. In 1472, Ivan the Great (reigning between 1462 and 1505), married the niece of the last Byzantine Emperor. The Grand Prince of Moscow Ivan the Terrible give



himself the titles of "autocrat" and "tsar" and started to use the double-headed eagle of Byzantium.

Ideologically, this first universal claim to Moscow was justified by the monk Philotheus Pskov in some letters to the Tsar Vasily III in 1510:

"We say a few words about the current glorious reign of our brighter and most powerful Lord, who on all Earth it is the only Tsar of the Christians and the ruler of all the Divine thrones, of the holy universal apostolic church that was born in the place of Rome and Constantinople and that exists in the city for God saves Moscow, the holy church and the glorious Assumption of the Virgin Mother of God, where she alone in the universe shines with greater beauty than the sun. Blessed by God and Christ, all Christian kingdoms arrived and joined in one kingdom of our Lord, according to the books of the prophets, the Roman kingdom: two Romes have fallen, the third stands and the fourth will not come" (Milhazes, 2016).

The election of the first Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church called Job was driven by Tsar Fyodor, son of Ivan the Terrible in 1589. In fact, Fyodor was completely controlled by the boyar Boris Godunov, who came to succeed the Russian throne. (Ulojionnaia Gramota, 1589).

However, with the advent of absolutism, the Russian imperial power came to completely control the Russian Orthodox Church. Peter the Great decided in 1700 to settle the post of Patriarch and Russian Orthodoxes under the preview of the Holy Synod, a kind of ministry headed by a laity appointed by the tsar himself.

This situation continued until 1917, but when the Russian Orthodox Church elected Patriarch Tikhon, the country was already run by a communist regime that aimed to put an end to religion as a social phenomenon (Gubonin, 1994). Until the end of the USSR in 1991, this church, or more precisely, what was left of it after numerous anti-religious campaigns, entirely depended on the State Committee for Religious Affairs.

After the fall of Communism in the USSR, there was an "invasion" of religions and sects that tried to fill the vacuum left by atheism. Not prepared to face competition, the Russian Orthodox Church demanded that they and their "canonical territory" were recognised by political power, not only in Russia but also in neighboring countries such as Belarus and Ukraine.

Political power, especially during the presidency of Vladimir Putin (which started in 2000), met the requirements of the Russian Orthodox Church, and in return he received support for his domestic and foreign policies. In the field of diplomacy, the Moscow Patriarchate supported the sending of Russian troops to South Ossetia and Abkhazia (Georgia's breakaway regions) in 2008; the invasion of Crimea and Eastern Ukraine in 2014-2015; and the Russia's aviation participation in the war in Syria.



Platform of understanding

The Joint Declaration adopted at the Havana Summit contained the issues and concerns that could cement the beginning of joint work between the two Christian churches internationally.

In paragraphs 8-13, the Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill launched a dramatic appeal in defence of persecuted and killed Christians in the Middle East and North Africa that had dipped into cruel civil wars.

Paragraph 14 welcomes increased religiosity in countries once oppressed by communist regimes, notably Russia (Declaração Conjunta, 2016). A study by the Levada Centre in November 2012 on the Russian Federation shows that 74% of respondents claimed to be Orthodox. However, it should be noted that only a minority regularly attend temples or meet religious duties. According to the same poll, 24% of respondents "never attend a temple", 29% only go there for "christenings, weddings and funerals" and only 7% for confession and communion (Levada Center, 2012). Basically, most consider themselves Orthodox based on national consciousness.

In the Joint Declaration, Francisco and Kirill also draw attention to the danger that are contained in processes taking place in the modern world, for example, secularisation and relativism, defence of abortion and euthanasia and attacks on the Christian concept of family. In this situation, they called for Europe to remember its Christian roots (Declaração Conjunta, 2016).

This is undoubtedly one of the fields where cooperation between the two Christian Churches may develop with greater intensity, as they were facing the same challenges, but in some cases in a different form. For example, if on abortion the Catholic Church fights against legalisation, the Orthodox Church is fighting for its ban. This is because in the USSR and later in Russia, abortion was almost always legal and, due to the almost non-existence of anti-contraceptives, particularly in the Soviet Union, numbers were high. In particular in 1980, 4,506,000 legal abortions were recorded (Rossiiskii Statisticheskii ejegodnik, 2007). The number has seen a significant reduction (1,186,100 in 2007 or 66.6 abortions per 100 births) (Federalnaia Slujba gossudarstvennoi statistiki, 2011), but the Patriarchate of Moscow still considered it an authentic "killing of innocents" and has been engaged in campaigns to outlaw abortion in the country.

War between Christians

The leaders of the two Christian churches could not fail to address the military conflict in Ukraine. First, because it is home to the second largest Orthodox community after Russia, and second because in the Western part of the country most people are Greek-Catholic (Uniate) Christians, who follow the Orthodox liturgical rite but recognise the supremacy of the Pope of Rome.

When Ukraine became an independent country after the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Ukrainian political elite also needed to create a "national church" in



order to demarcate Moscow. In 1992, part of the Ukrainian Orthodox clergy separated from the Ukrainian Orthodox Church - Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) and created the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyivan Patriarchate (UOC-KP), currently headed by Filaret, Patriarch of Kiev and all of Ukraine, with around 3,000 parishes in the country. The Moscow Patriarch cut relations with the new Ukrainian Church, considering it "cissionista".

Despite all the efforts of the Ukrainian leadership to restore dialogue, the two Orthodox communities continued to "turn their backs" and the relations between them soured after Moscow annexed Crimea in 2014 and militarily occupied part of Eastern Ukraine, which continues until the present.

There is also the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAPC), which was established abroad by large Ukrainian diaspora. In 1989, this church settled in Ukraine but in the following year, the clergy and the faithful went to UOC-MP and joined UOC-KP. Currently with about 550 parishes, the UAPC keeps irregular contact with the other two orthodox churches.

In turn, the Catholic world is represented in the country by two churches: the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC) and the Ukrainian Roman Catholic Church (URCC). Having a very significant weight in Ukrainian society (with about 800 parishes), the UGCC is the second most numerous ecclesial community in the country, with more than 3,000 parishes and 10 million followers.

The UGCC was created in 1596 thanks to the Union of Brest, the Vatican's attempt to unite Orthodox and Catholic Christians (hence the name Uniate) in one church under the direction of the Pope of Rome. In accordance with its other name (Greek Catholic), the Uniates conserved their rites and traditional liturgical language, but they recognised the authority of the Pope and Catholic dogma.

The Catholicism of an Eastern rite was the target of several prohibition attempts. In 1839, the Russian tsar Nicholas I, whose empire included Ukraine, dissolved the Synod of the Greek Catholic Church, ordering the faithful to choose between the Russian Orthodox Church or the Catholic Church. However, most of the Uniates did not obey this order.

In 1945 under the pretext of the Uniate hierarchs having collaborated with Nazi Germany, the Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin dissolved the UGCC. In 1946, the communist authorities organised the "Council of Lviv of the Greek-Catholic Ukrainian Church", which voted for passage of the faithful followers to the Russian Orthodox Church.

However, the Uniates did not comply with the decision and went underground. No Uniate bishop participated in Lviv Council, with the Greek-Catholic pastors preferring concentration camps or emigration to collaboration with the Communist regime.

By the end of the Soviet dictatorship, millions of Ukrainian Uniates were forced to organise clandestine worship ceremonies in private homes or attend the few Catholics and Russian Orthodox churches that remained open.

In 1990, the Committee for Religious Affairs together with the Ukrainian Council of Ministers legalised the Uniates, who demanded that the Russian Orthodox Church return the numerous temples that had been confiscated and handed over to the



Russian Orthodox Church by Joseph Stalin. In 1945, the UGCC had more than 4,000 temples and chapels, seminaries and an academy of theology.

A commission was set up, consisting of representatives of the Vatican, the Uniate Church, the Russian Orthodox Church and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, in order to control the return of confiscated churches to the Uniates and avoid conflicts. However, due to the lengthy process, the followers of the Greek-Catholic Ukrainian Church began to occupy the buildings of worship that had been taken in 1945.

The Patriarchate of Moscow reacted sharply, accusing the Vatican of being behind the actions of the Uniate believers and interpreted it as an offensive against UOC-MP. This is one of the major friction between the Moscow Patriarchate and the Vatican, but it is not only the one with regard to the situation created around the UGCC. (Milhazes, 2005).

Contesting voices

As was expected, this meeting provoked negative reactions within the fundamentalist and nationalist wings of the Russian Orthodox Church. The Archpriest Vladislav Emilianov, parish priest in one of the regions of Siberia, considered the meeting in Havana to be "treason":

"The sad and well-known events lead me to raise my voice in support of the clergy and Orthodox laity, who fight for the defence of dogma and canons of the Orthodox Church ... The meeting of Patriarch Kirill with Pope provoked a feeling of betrayal" (Emilianov, 2016).

Alexei Morozov, parish priest of the Novgorod region, member of the Union of Writers of Russia and President of the Orthodox Intellectuality Assembly, even threatens to cause a schism within the Russian Orthodox Church:

"Today, our church is on the verge of a schism. After the known religious events of early February 2016, many followers are afraid to enter their temples for confession and communion. Hundreds of thousands of people drive themselves to their spiritual guides and ask what to do if the head of the Church, despite the canons and the Orthodox tradition, enters into open contact with the Latinos and their boss [the Pope of Rome] and preaches the ecumenism of heresy as an integral part of the church's life" (Alexei, 2016).

Some Greek-Catholic Christians were also unhappy with the very occurrence of the meeting. Bishop Sviatoslav, head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Uniate Church, commented:



"Drawing on our centuries of experience, I can affirm: when the Vatican and Moscow organise meetings or sign common texts, it is not worth expecting anything good to come from them".

Commenting specifically on paragraph 25 of the Joint Declaration:

"We hope that our meeting can also contribute to reconciliation where there are tensions between Greek Catholics and Orthodox peoples. Today, it is clear that the method of "Uniatism" of the past, understood as the union of a community to another separate church, is not a way to restore unity. However, the ecclesial communities that arose in these historical circumstances have the right to exist and to undertake all that is necessary to meet the spiritual needs of the faithful, while seeking to live in peace with its neighbours. Orthodox and Greek Catholics need to reconcile and find mutually acceptable ways of living together",

he stressed:

"There is no doubt that this text has caused an overall disillusionment among many believers of our Church and among many committed citizens of Ukraine. Today, many addressed to me the way and told me that they feel betrayed by the Vatican, being disillusioned with the half-truth of this document"
(Sviatoslav, 2016)

The Uniates consider that the Russian Orthodox Church fully supported the invasion of Crimea by Russian troops in 2014 and the military actions of Russian troops in Eastern Ukraine.

Therefore, it is very difficult to predict how the dialogue between Rome and Moscow will develop, but there is no doubt that the two Christian churches will have to overcome enormous obstacles to start talking about a union in the distant future. For example, in the medium or long term, a visit from the Pope of Rome to Russia is not foreseeable. The same can be said of a visit of the Patriarch of Moscow to the Vatican. Much will also depend on the evolution of Russian foreign policy and its objectives.

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