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The Meeting between Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill, and Its Political Significance for Ukraine and Russia

Anna Maria Dyner

The meeting between the Pope and the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, which took place on 12 February in Havana, has a special religious and political meaning. Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill signed a joint statement in which they referred, among other things, to current events in the world, mainly to conflicts in the Middle East and Ukraine, as well as the migration crisis and the persecution of Christians. The points concerning the political situation in Ukraine and hopes for the unification of the factions of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church were considered controversial, and were interpreted as support of the Catholic Church for Russian policy in Ukraine. However, the declaration should be used by the Holy See to facilitate the functioning of the Catholic Church, in Russia as well as in Crimea and Donbas.

The Statement. The joint message by Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill calls for inter-religious dialogue and Christian unity, and refers to the current international situation. The document paid particular attention to the situation in the Middle East, especially in Syria, calling for an end to the war in that country as soon as possible. The hierarchs also indicated the tragic position of Christians in the region and condemned their persecution, and appealed to the international community in connection with the need to resolve the migration crisis and the support that Christians should give to refugees.

The document also contains references to the situation in Ukraine, both political and religious, although they represent only a small part of the statement. Both religious leaders expressed hope for the unification of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and called for the cooperation of Orthodox and Greek Catholics. They also appealed for de-escalation of the conflict in Ukraine. Moreover, they said, the Catholic and the Orthodox Churches were both obliged to support social dialogue. The statement also underlined that the two denominations were not in competition and that the followers of each should respect those of the other.

Criticism of the Document in Ukraine. Although only four points of the joint statement by the Pope and the Patriarch refers to Catholic-Orthodox, the document has particular importance for these relations in Ukraine and Russia. The point concerning the unification of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in accordance with canonical norms is seen as the most controversial, especially because the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate), being in the Orthodox world the only canonical Orthodox Church in Ukraine, not only seeks to unite all Orthodox factions under its patronage but also because it is seen as an instrument of Russian policy. For this reason, the message of Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill has been strongly criticised by the Ukrainian Orthodox clergy representing the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Kyiv Patriarchate and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church. They stressed that they do not agree to any decisions about the unification process being taken without their participation. This is all the more important as both Orthodox Churches want to create a Common Autocephalous Church, but this will not be possible without the agreement of the Russian Orthodox Church. Moreover, the joint statement was received by some as a call by the Holy See for unity under the auspices of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and the

interference of the Catholic Church in Ukrainian Orthodoxy. The fact that the Pope spoke about the situation in Ukraine only with a representative of the Russian Orthodox Church, and not with the others, was also criticised.

The Greek Catholic Church also distanced itself from the document, stressing that it had not been consulted about the content, especially the assessment of the political situation in Ukraine. At the same time, however, the Greek Catholic Church also mentioned the point noting that it had the right to function without hindrance. This is important because members of the Greek Catholic Church have, over the years, been regarded by the Orthodox churches as apostates, and even now are often treated as a sect. In this context it is worth noting that the message of Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill goes further than the Balamand declaration, signed by the Catholic and Orthodox churches in 1993. Moreover, the new document represents a continuation of the dialogue initiated in 1979, when Pope John Paul II and Patriarch of Constantinople Dimitri I appointed a joint theological commission.

Importance for Russia. In assessing the significance of the document it is important to note that it was written taking into account the interests of the two churches, which in the case of the Russian Orthodox Church are largely identical with the interests of the Russian state. Moreover, the ROC's actions are very often part of Russian diplomacy, which is exemplified not only by foreign visits made by the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, but also by the documents he has signed. Joint statement by Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill could therefore be considered as the Catholic Church's support for the policy of the Russian President Vladimir Putin, who in the international arena is trying to attract supporters of traditional values. Moreover, for the Russian Orthodox Church this meeting may help to integrate the territory it considers its own by canonical right. This is especially important because of the dispute between the Patriarchs Kirill of Moscow and Bartholomew I of Constantinople, since the latter announced a return to the idea of Pentarchy (the five most important centres of the Church), and of the place reserved for the patriarch of Rome being offered not to the Russian Orthodox Church but to the Orthodox Church of Cyprus. Since that time Kirill has tried to unite Eastern Orthodoxy, as a counterweight to the Bartholomew's consolidation of Mediterranean Orthodoxy. The meeting between the Pope and the Patriarch was also important for the Russian Orthodox Church's position ahead of the Pan-Orthodox Council planned for this year (it has been in preparation since 1961), as it showed that the Russian Orthodox Church is able to maintain an effective dialogue with the Catholics, in the same way that other Orthodox churches can.

Meaning for the Holy See. The potential benefit of the statement for the Catholic Church, often accused of proselytising by the Orthodox Church, is to ensure it can function without interference in Russia. In this context, the point stating that Catholic and Orthodox Christians are brothers, and containing a call for mutual respect and harmony, could be of particular importance. It should be emphasized that the Catholic Church in Russia still has problems, for example regarding obstacles to the construction of churches, inviting priests and monks from other countries to work in Russia, and obtaining foreign aid.

The document also included a statement that the Greek Catholic Church should cooperate with the Russian Orthodox Church. This may be of particular importance in the context of the problems of the Greek Catholic communities working in Crimea or in Donbas. The Holy See has not changed the boundaries of the diocese in Ukraine, but in December of 2014 the Special Pastoral District of Crimea and Sevastopol was created. This structure is intended to enable the Catholic Church to function on the peninsula, including the possibility of providing pastoral care for the Greek Catholic faithful. The majority of the Greek Catholic clergy had to leave Crimea (after it was annexed by Russia), and by the end of 2016 all religious communities operating there will have to re-register, which means that their future will depend on the attitude of the current government of the peninsula.

As in the case of Crimea, most Greek Catholic priests also left Donbas, and the functioning of the Greek Catholic parish there is hindered by the separatist authorities. However, the Catholic Church could take advantage of help from the Russian Orthodox Church in solving this problem.

It should be emphasised that, although the meeting of Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill in Havana was an essential part of the dialogue between the Holy See and the Moscow Patriarchate (the Catholic Church traditionally has good relations with the other Orthodox patriarchates), a real breakthrough will only be possible when the Pope is invited to Moscow, which has been the goal of the Catholic Church for many years.