

UKRAINE: Orthodoxy, the “Ukrainian schism” turns into a political match

The “Tomos” which sanctioned the birth of the independent Ukrainian Orthodox Church is being taken on tour to provinces throughout the country. While President Poroshenko, running to be re-elected in the end of March elections, does not miss one «thanksgiving ceremony»

By Gianni Valente

La Stampa (21.01.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2HD4yLY> – The independent Ukrainian Orthodox Church has just seen the light, and is already being called in the match for the uncertain Ukrainian presidential elections scheduled for 31 March next. The outgoing president Petro Poroshenko co-starred and was a decisive sponsor of the entire process that ended on 6 January with the attribution of the “Tomos” (decree granting autocephaly) delivered by the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomew I to Metropolitan Epiphany, primate of the new Ukrainian Orthodox Church. After the solemnity of Christmas – celebrated in Ukraine on 7 January – Poroshenko’s institutional agenda has been jam-packed with trips to urban areas of the different Ukrainian provinces in the company of the metropolitan Epiphany and other senior representatives of the new independent Ukrainian Church, to celebrate the granting of autocephaly in a long series of “thanksgiving ceremonies”. During these celebrations, the same “Tomos” is taken on tour to provinces throughout the country (starting with Vinnycja and Volinia), to be exhibited and celebrated as a relic in different cathedrals.

Participation in thanksgiving ceremonies seems to play a key role in Poroshenko's planned schedule of initiatives and commitments in his election campaign's final sprint. During the celebrations, in his speeches always in the presence of the "Tomos", the outgoing president claims the birth of an Orthodox Ukrainian Church as a turning point in the path to assert the interests of the nation. In mid-January, in Luc'k Cathedral, he said that the process of strengthening the state is underway and the independent Ukrainian Church provides the spiritual foundation for the independence of the nation.

On that occasion, the mass was celebrated by Metropolitan Filaret, who in the 'nineties of the last century proclaimed himself "Patriarch of Kiev" and led an ecclesial structure considered schismatic by the other Orthodox Churches (and now merged as a majority component in the new Ukrainian Orthodox autocephalous Church). "There have been many moments", Filaret said on that occasion, referring to the process of obtaining the "Tomos" of granting autocephaly to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church "in which it seemed as if had reached a deadlock, but thanks to the wisdom and perseverance of the President we have overcome the crisis".

The former self-proclaimed Patriarch of Kiev also referred to the Ukrainian Orthodox who did not support the process to obtain autocephaly and remained in the Ukrainian Orthodox Church linked to the Patriarchate of Moscow, led by Metropolitan Onufry: "Those who do not want to join us – Filaret said – hope in the strength of Moscow, but Moscow will lose its strength and the victory will be ours, Ukrainian, along with the entire civilized world ... And, most importantly, God is with us".

The creation of a Ukrainian Church independent from Moscow is, de facto, the argument that Poroshenko most insists on when asking voters to confirm him at the head of the country. But it is precisely the strong interweaving of the result obtained at the ecclesial level and the changing alchemy of politics that weighs heavily on the future of the Christian communities in Ukraine in ways that are imponderable. The outcome of the upcoming presidential elections hangs like an unknown factor even on the path of the new ecclesial "autocephalous" structure. If Poroshenko wins, the project of creating a national Ukrainian Church will find its political consecration. But currently the outgoing president is only third in the polls, behind former prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko and outsider actor Volodymyr Zelenski. If the response of the polls were to confirm the orientation of the last electoral results, the outgoing Ukrainian president would not even have access to the ballot of the second round of voting and would be barred from any chance of succeeding himself. At that point, the choice of those who intertwined the demands for independence of Ukrainian Orthodoxy with Poroshenko's political design could prove – in the long run – to be a short-sighted gamble.

The uncertain outcome of the Ukrainian presidential elections also partially explains the substantial absence of official reactions from the other Orthodox Churches to the emergence of a new autocephalous Church, which took place with the legitimization of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. The Patriarchate of Moscow is increasing initiatives and pressure to denounce the canonically invalid profile of the new Ukrainian ecclesial entity. The other primates, for now, are taking time, also to see how the match for the Ukrainian presidency will end. And to wait and see if a possible change in the political scenario could open up new

prospects on the ecclesial side. Almost all the candidates in the presidential elections are in favor of the autocephaly of Ukrainian Orthodoxy, but not all share the strategy used by Poroshenko to achieve the goal and the way he is collecting the political earnings of the operation.

Putin “the theologian”

The leaders and synods of the Orthodox Churches seem to be waiting for further developments before taking clear and official action on the “Ukrainian issue”. Yet Vladimir Putin is not playing along those same lines. During his recent – and triumphal – visit to Serbia, the Russian president also resorted to ecclesiological and spiritual arguments to stigmatize the birth of the Ukrainian national Orthodox Church as a “political operation”. “The Ukrainian administration,” said Putin in interviews with Serbian media such as Politics and Vecernje Novosti, “is ready to sacrifice the inter-confessional accord in the country to the campaign of the outgoing president, which is based on the search for enemies and attempts to keep power at all costs”.

The Kremlin leader assured that Russia “has no intention to interfere in ecclesial processes, especially ones unfolding in the territory of the sovereign neighbor state”. But he dismissed the whole process as an attempt to “legitimize the schismatic communities present in Ukraine” and as “an exclusively political, secular plan”, which aims to “divide the peoples of Russia and Ukraine, sowing seeds of ethnic and religious discord” and has “nothing to do with the spiritual life”. Putin also argued that the Ukrainian Orthodox Church at the Moscow Patriarchate “is in fact completely independent in its actions, and its connection with the Russian Orthodox

Church is of a purely canonical character.

The effects on dialogue with Catholics

Meanwhile the Holy See also records the effects of the intra-Orthodox conflict in Ukraine on the ongoing theological dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches on the themes of the Primacy and Synodality. “Despite the position of absolute neutrality of the Catholic Church on the matter of Ukrainian autocephaly – Don Andrea Palmieri, Undersecretary of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity, wrote in L’Osservatore Romano – the decision of the Holy Synod of the Patriarchate of Moscow taken on 14 September, following the nomination of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of two exarchs for Ukraine, according to which, among other things, the participation of representatives of the Patriarchate of Moscow in all the commissions presided over by a bishop of the Ecumenical Patriarchate is forbidden, is fraught with potentially negative consequences on the work of the Joint International Commission (of theological dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches, Ed.).

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