

The Vilnius Agreement with the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople.

What might appear to be an affair circumscribed to the complex balances of the hierarchies of the Orthodox Churches in Eastern Europe is, in reality, a relevant case of ecclesiastical politics. Last 17 February, Bartholomew I, Greek Orthodox Archbishop, Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople since 1991, returned five priests of the Orthodox eparchy of the Moscow Patriarchate in Lithuania to pastoral service. The five Orthodox priests, Fathers Vladimir Seljavko, Vitaljus Motskus, Vitalis Dauparas, Gintaras Sungajla and Georgij Ananiev, of mixed Russian-Lithuanian ethnicity, had incurred ecclesiastical censure by their own direct canonical authority, Metropolitan Bishop Innokentij of Vilnius. Appealing to Bartholomew and obtaining an order of canonical reinstatement from him, they effectively came under Constantinopolitan jurisdiction, leaving the obedience of their own metropolitan. The Russian-Ukrainian war of aggression was the trigger of this affair, which was accompanied by other side effects, such as the mass emigration of some 40,000 Ukrainian Orthodox refugees, unwilling to join the churches with Lithuanians of Russian stock.

These are the most immediate antecedents that led to the signing, on 22 March, in Vilnius, of an agreement between the Republic of Lithuania and the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, an institutional subject that historically exercises a role of theological and political reference for the universe of Orthodoxy.

The fracture, in truth, records other precedents that indicate the sedimentation of a crisis of relations much more distant in time (highlighted by the defection of the Moscow Patriarchate at the Pan-Orthodox Council of Crete, in 2016), starting from the split linked to the recognition, granted by Bartholomew I, of autocephaly to the Ukrainian Church (led by Metropolitan Epiphanius). Already with regard to the latter event, Moscow's reactions had been expressed by Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, head of external relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, who had declared the split (schism) of the Orthodox world between Constantinople and Moscow. The direct effect of these events was the Moscow Patriarchate's decision to break Eucharistic communion with the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Hilarion reiterated the point by stating, among other things, that: "In accordance with the canonical laws governing the Church, bishops who recognise schismatic groups, themselves become schismatic".

The Vilnius agreement concerns the local Orthodoxy of about 150,000 faithful (out of a population of three and a half million, 79% of whom are Catholic), who for centuries have been linked to the patriarchate of Moscow, although previously subject (from the 13th to the 17th century) to the patriarchate of Constantinople.

The text of the agreement contains five articles and opens with a declaration of intent which, when compared to the circumstances outlined above, appears quite utopian: "The purpose of the present agreement is to strengthen and develop relations and cooperation between the parties in areas of mutual interest, including matters concerning the establishment, institutionalisation and functioning of the local Church in Lithuania under the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and to facilitate the implementation of freedom of conscience and religion for believers of the Orthodox confession who seek to practise their religion in the Orthodox Church under the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate."

More in detail, the Agreement provides for measures to institutionalise the structures of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in the country by guaranteeing the possibility of renting premises from the State and conducting missionary, educational and charitable activities. The clergy of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Lithuania will enjoy the same legal status as the clergy of other traditional confessions in Lithuania. In this regard, it should be recalled that Lithuania has had an important pactual tradition since as far back as 1927 with the Holy See, which was subsequently consolidated with the signing of

five agreements, between 2000 and 2020¹, including a General Concordat Agreement that reproduces part of the provisions signed in Vilnius.

Regarding the reasons behind this agreement on confessional freedom, Bartholomew expressed himself clearly, identifying the intra-Orthodox schism and the Russian-Ukrainian war as the premises. Regarding the schism he warned that: “The Ukrainian crisis is connected with the most fundamental challenge of the Orthodox Christian world”.

Ever since Russia obtained the patriarchate (1589), at the urging of the tsars, the ideology of the ‘third Rome’ has increased, making the Church an instrument for the strategic objectives of political power, of which Putin and Patriarch Kiril are the current interpreters. For the ideology of Panslavism, the autocephaly of a Church is not linked to territory, but to ethnicity (ethnophiletism). “Its current incarnation is the fundamentalist ideology of the ‘Russian world’ (Russkiy Mir). From it springs the justification for war. Thus: “the Russian Orthodox Church shares responsibility for the war together with the state leadership in Moscow”.

Bartholomew continues: ‘On 5 January 2019, the tome granting autocephaly to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine was signed. The detachment of the significant Ukrainian Orthodox population from Moscow’s tutelage has deprived the Russian Church of much of the substance of its anti-ecclesiological claim in its attempt at primacy in Orthodoxy’. Moreover, the new Orthodox ecclesiastical jurisdiction on Lithuanian soil, in the form of a new exarchate, ‘would restore historical justice’, going back to the metropolia of Lithuania that existed between the 12th and 14th centuries, under the protection of the principality of Vilno, where a Russian Orthodox jurisdiction dependent on Constantinople existed.

As far as the civil authorities are concerned, Lithuanian Prime Minister Ingrida Šimonite stated that it is ‘a decision of the Mother Church of Constantinople, in which we do not intend to interfere’.

Šimonite and the President of the Lithuanian Republic, Gitanas Nausėda, very appropriately, perhaps with a respectful consideration of the historical fact that seems to be absent in the Western world, maintain a position of non-direct involvement in the ecclesiastical issue, distancing themselves from the instrumental policy with which former Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko obtained Ukrainian Orthodox autocephaly (2018) in a break with the Church in Moscow.

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¹ Concordat between the Holy See and the Government of Lithuania (27 September 1927). Agreement between the Holy See and the Republic of Lithuania on Cooperation in Education and Culture (5 May 2000), in AAS, 92 (2000), pp. 783-795; Agreement between the Holy See and the Republic of Lithuania on the Legal Aspects of Relations between the Catholic Church and the State (5 May 2000), in AAS, 92 (2000), pp. 795-809; Agreement between the Holy See and the Republic of Lithuania on the pastoral care of Catholics serving in the Armed Forces (5 May 2000), in AAS, 92 (2000), pp. 809-816.

The subject of higher education was further updated with the conclusion of an Agreement between the Holy See and the Republic of Lithuania on the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education (8 June 2012), in AAS 104 (2012), pp. 1062-1075. This agreement had a correction completed between October and December 2020: Correction about Agreement between the Holy See and the Republic of Lithuania on the Recognition of Qualifications Relating to Higher Education, in AAS 113 (2021), pp. 85-91.