



Metropolitan Hilarion: Christianity is a religion of the people of spirit

Many ask: what does it mean to be a Christian? This is what we read in the 3d century manuscript known as 'A Letter to Diognetus' and ascribed to St. Justin the Martyr: 'there is something extraordinary about their lives. They live in their own countries as though they were only passing through. They play their full role as citizens, but labor under all the disabilities of aliens. Any country can be their homeland, but for them their homeland, wherever it may be, is a foreign country... To speak in general terms, the Christian is to the world what the soul is to the body'.

These words speak to us about the self-determination of the early Christian community. In spite of the fact that many centuries have elapsed since this letter was written, its words in fact concern each of us. We really live in our own country, while wearing the same clothes, other people do and speak in the same language as those around us, but we are called to be *the salt of the earth* and *the light of the world*.

To be a Christian means to bear a special responsibility as we should live the life of an ordinary person while filling this life with a special inner spiritual meaning. We should live in a way that may help other people to find the truth that has been revealed to us through the Church, through Christian faith. And to be able to do it we have to be first of all healthy and strong spiritually.

A Christian is never lonely

I will not speak now about other religions and other forms of religious experience, but rather about the Christian experience and about what the Church offers us if we are really her full-fledged members.

A Christian is never lonely because he or she is a member of a church community. In the Church, you are among your brothers and sisters.

It is impossible to be a Christian and not to be a church-goer. Those are mistaken and deceive themselves and others who say, 'God is in my soul; the most important thing is to be a good person. What are all these rituals for? Why one should pray to God when He knows everything without one's prayers? Why should one pray to saints when we do not need any mediators between us and God?' There is a whole group of those who claim to be believers but find all kinds of excuses for not going church and not to be a member of a church community.

It is insufficient however to have God in one's soul to be a Christian. Moreover, many of those who believe to have God in their souls actually do not have God in their souls. Indeed, to have God in one's soul means to always remember Him and to invariably direct one's life towards Him, to be in a state of continuous communion with God through prayer and church sacraments. Therefore, it is impossible to bear God in one's soul without being a member of a religious community.

A religion of the people of spirit

Christianity is a religion for people of spirit. It does not mean however that a weak person cannot find himself or herself in Christian faith. The Church is open for everyone, as there is room in it for the righteous and the sinners, for the rich and the poor, for the healthy and the sick, for the strong and the weak. The Church enables the weak to find spiritual strength and spiritual energy and the sick, if not to recover from a bodily illness, at least to find resources in oneself to look at this illness as a visit from God and to endure it with patience and hope for divine mercy. The Church helps everyone to withstand hardships, miseries and misfortunes which have fallen to one's lot.

The Church, the holy fathers said, is a spiritual healer, a place where one comes to in order to be healed and to be healed above all from one's sinful way of life, from sinful habits. But the Church is also a school which is absolutely irreplaceable by any books or any study in general or special educational institution because the Church is a school of spiritual life. This school helps one not only to build one's relations with God correctly but also to build one's relations with the surrounding world and people. This is why the Church is a source of spiritual strength; this is why the Church can make even weak ones the people of spirit.

A miracle of spiritual transformation

From church history we know a great number of people who came to the Church being quite helpless but once in the church fold they enrich themselves spiritually as much as to become capable of enlightening others with the light of Christ's truth. Such were the apostles who, when they were called by the Lord, were semi-literate or altogether illiterate fishermen who knew nothing except for their nets. But once coming to Christ and becoming members of the community of the Lord's disciples, they were enlightened with the Holy Spirit and on Pentecost were given such spiritual power that turned them from ordinary fishermen into teachers of morality and the spiritual life.

This spiritual transformation and moral regeneration happened and happens in the Church to many people. From my own 20-year long experience of pastoral ministry I can say that I have seen many people who came to the Church utterly tormented, fallen, heart-broken and crushed under the burden of their own sins and bad habits. Among those who came to church were also drug-addicts who had

nothing human left in them. But gradually, through participation in church sacraments, through changing their way of life they would abandon drugs. Grafted upon the fertile vine of the Church of Christ, they would begin to be nourished with its life-giving juices and these juices came gradually to replace in their bodies the poison they used to take in before. With my own eyes I have seen the spiritual transformation that happened to these people, sometimes as quickly as in a one or two years' time.

This is the greatest miracle that can be seen in the Christian Church. This miracle is especially vivid to pastors who can oversee the spiritual development of their flock. Sometimes we are asked: why there were miraculous things in old times but they are absent today. The answer is very simple: there were miracles in old times and there are miracles today, and one of these miracles is the spiritual transformation that happens to one in the Church. This is why the Church is so needed: she transforms one's life and hence a society since the life of a human community improves through the spiritual transformation of each of us.

A young Christian is called to be a missionary

What is the responsibility of a young Christian in today's world? Every Christian is called to be a missionary and apostle, be he young or old, healthy or sick, educated or uneducated. But a young man with his energy and resources not wasted on unnecessary and harmful things can do good to himself and others if he takes his Christian calling most seriously.

A young person is surrounded today with numerous temptations, and the ideology predominant in today's world leaves little room for the spiritual development of the personality so that one could live up to Christian ideals. The text I cited in the beginning of my address states that Christians are no different from others in appearance. But their inner difference from non-believers or the so-called not-practicing believers is very great. In order to become 'the soul in a body', to be *the salt of the earth* and *the light of the world*, one should have a very firm moral and spiritual inner pivot, but it is impossible to achieve this through the mechanical rejection of everything.

Finding the meaning of life

Many young people today suffer not from a lack of money, entertainment or some material comforts but from a lack for meaning of life, as they have everything but do not know what they live for. This inner conflict leads quite a lot of young people to drugs, alcohol, immorality and sometimes becomes a reason for premature death and even suicide.

A purposeless and meaningless existence without God, without an ultimate meaning and hence without high moral values – this is what the godless secular world offers eventually to people. The consumer

society today offers young people all the opportunities for meeting their material needs. Even the system of education and formation, especially the world outlook propagated through the mass media, tend to create a special type of personality whose whole activity is aimed at consumption. To take all from life – this is the ideology which is preached by the consumer society. To acquire as much as possible, to seek money, success and career – these are the ideals also preached by today's youth culture. Not deny oneself anything, not restrict oneself in anything, have fun, enjoy life because life is short and youth is transitory – this is the ideology lived up by many young people. We, Orthodox Christians, should help these people understand that the meaning of life is impossible to find if one's whole scale of spiritual and moral values is aimed only at consumerism, success, career and achievement of earthly happiness and pleasure.

Knowing firmly the meaning of our own life, we should help other people to understand that one should live with a certain purpose which is the spiritual and moral improvement so that each of us may become better, so that thousands of people around us may be saved, as St. Seraphim of Sarov said.

The Church is not a system of bans

Sometimes the Church and her teaching are perceived as a system of moral bans in which a believer is prohibited from doing what is allowed to other people. This is a complete wrong understanding. In fact there are certain bans or rather recommendations which the Church gives to people, such as to refrain from what people living in the world do not refrain. But this system of prohibitions or recommendations is aimed wholly to help one eventually to live a better, a happier life so that one could live a full life and understand what one lives for.

The prohibitions and recommendations the Church keeps so firmly despite the spirits of the time are aimed not to restrict one and make one unhappy but to give one a full life.

I will give you some examples. Very popular among young people today is indifference toward early or indiscriminate sexual relations. Many believe that there is nothing wrong in 'having fun' in one's youth. In due time, these young people believe, we will steady down, marry and start a family. But the indiscriminate sexual life that many begin very early often leads to tragic consequences.

A person accustomed to indulging in sexual pleasure without ensuing moral commitments will find it difficult to acquire a full-fledged and solid family. He will regard his sexual partner as an object for consumption and will try to build marital relations on physical attraction alone: if it is present today it is all right, and if it is over tomorrow it is time to divorce. Such love has no pivot. No foundation: as soon as the wind rises and the water spills the edifice collapses. Many young people find it very difficult to start a family because at an early age they broke the moral prohibition on sexual relations with those of their

age. This is a reason for the many divorces and one-parent families in which a child is raised without father, mother and even without his or her parents. For this reason in our country, just as in many others, there is a tremendous, simply incredible number of abortions.

‘Family planning’

Yet many people do not even regard abortion as a crime. They believe it to be a quite ordinary thing, a routine medical operation, which happens simply because a man or a woman or both spouses are not ready as yet to have children. The very idea of ‘family planning’ is in fact blasphemous as it contradicts not only Christian teaching but also the very common sense on which human life has been built for centuries.

Why has humankind multiplied for centuries? - Simply because for human beings the family, marital fidelity and childbirth have been important spiritual and moral ideals. If one had many children it was seen as a special blessing of God. Read the Old Testament: if one had no children it was seen as a punishment or curse. People used to see precisely in children and their birth and upbringing one of the ultimate goals of their existence and to thank God for every child who was sent to them by Divine Providence. There was no idea that the number of children can be ‘planned’ and that some of them can be rejected through abortion while others can be given birth and raised.

When the traditional ideal was forgotten, when family ceased to be a priority, when many people gave priority to material success, career and money while children were put to the margins of human existence, precisely at that time the crisis in the birth rate began to last to this day. A child today is needed by many couples only to avoid feeling inferior and unaccomplished. Today, for a one who wishes to feel successful it is very important to have a child, one child as a rule, because a child is included in the list of material goods necessary for happiness along with a flat, car, dog, wife if one is a man or husband if one is a woman. Normally this list includes one child, less frequently two children and rarely three children, while a large family is something that is almost altogether absent.

Meanwhile the Christian Church says that one’s happiness is not to live one’s own life but to give life to another. One needs not only to find happiness for oneself but also to hand down this happiness to others, first of all, one’s children, not only to learn something for oneself but also to teach others. Spouses feel special happiness when they bear a child and this happiness is incomparable with the happiness received in the pursuit of ideals of the consumer society.

Therefore the system of prohibitions that exists in the sphere of childbirth and upbringing, and that is understood by many young people as something completely obsolete and inconsistent with modern ideals, is created precisely to reproduce life on earth and to hand down this life with God’s blessing to

our children and grandchildren, not only in a materialistic but primarily in spiritual sense.

Dependence

Various dependences have become a serious threat to young people today. Dependence is a medical term. But it is based on the absolutely correct and purely medical idea that one is not a full personality and even one's physical existence cannot be full if one is lacking in oneself the spiritual and moral foundation which makes one independent from external factors.

Medical doctors speak today of alcoholic, narcotic and sexual dependences and the dependence on tobacco. All these are various aspects of the same phenomenon, which is the reluctance or failure of a person to exist without a 'doping' as he or she needs some stimulants in this or that form.

So a youth begins with beer while in school and later moves to stronger alcoholic beverages. Then it turns into a problem, a dependence, which one cannot overcome during one's life because one does not simply get accustomed to alcohol but acquires a biological attraction to it. Such people believe that without a drink one cannot be 'in good spirits', without a drink one cannot pour out one's heart in conversation, without a drink one cannot be happy in life. So every day they wait for a moment when the first glass can be taken to be followed by the second, then the third. If one has developed a biological dependence one cannot stop or he or she can be stopped only by family members or by a prolonged and unfortunately not always successful treatment of the dependence.

Then isn't it better to reject alcohol, drugs and other types of doping from the very beginning?

Today we also see the spreading of new dependences such as dependence on computer games when one is engulfed in the world of illusion instead of living a full human life. He withdraws into an illusory world, conquering some imaginary foes in it and gaining virtual victories because he is incapable of asserting himself in real life.

The Church calls people to real and full life. This presupposes certain bans not because the Church preaches some obsolete norms but because without rejecting certain things you will fall into dependence on them; without rejecting illusory values it is impossible to live up real values; without rejecting 'doping' you will lose taste for real life, real pleasures and genuine joy.

The Church can give people a genuine joy. It is the joy that showed forth in such zealots of the Church as St. Seraphim of Sarov who was a hermit living in scarce material conditions in a forest. He was deprived of the joys available to the modern man but he always lived in joy. He would welcome everyone who came to him with the words: 'Christ is risen, my sweet joy!' It would seem that those who came

from the world could enjoy material blessings and pleasures – indeed, among those who came to the starets were many well-off and successful people – but they turned to the saint who lived in poverty with their sorrows and despair. And the man who was deprived of all the earthly riches knew how to give them joy. He knew how to inspire them for spiritual achievements; he gave them strength. Many of those who talked to him found the inner pivot without which they could not live and exist. It means that the nature of continuous joy does not lie in material gains and pleasures but in a spiritual acquisition, that is, in a full inner life. This is the full inner life that the Church gives.

The Church and the Sacraments

The Church is a community of people who are bound by the experience of prayer and communion in the Sacraments. The Church is impossible without the Sacraments as they are the events in one's life in which God is revealed to one in a very special way. Through them a person is transformed because a Sacrament is a moment when something is turned into something else.

Take the Eucharist as an example: in this Sacrament the bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ. This happens invisibly for the material human eyes but we believe that after the priest's prayer, the prayer of the community, the invoking of the Holy Spirit and His descent upon the bread and wine, these material objects become the Body and Blood of Christ; they become the agents of Divine energy and Divine presence. And when we partake of Christ's Holy Mysteries we feel an inner spiritual change happening in us.

I often draw people's attention to the words of the Eucharistic prayer in which a priest or a bishop invokes the Holy Spirit, asking Him to descend 'on us and the gifts here', that is, on us who are present here and on the bread and wine. The Holy Spirit is to descend equally on the gifts to transform them into the Body and Blood of Christ and on the worshippers so that they may be transformed from the Old Testament people into new ones and to give them a new life and new resources.

The spiritual transformation takes place in the church Sacraments, and the principal and most powerful of them, after the Sacrament of Baptism as opening way to all other Sacraments, is the Holy Eucharist. Nowhere and never can a human being come into union with God closer than in this Sacrament in which our body becomes the body of Christ, our blood becomes the Blood of Christ.

There are also other Sacraments in which a human being is transformed, for instance, the Sacrament of Confession. Confession is not simply a moment when one comes to a priest to name one's sins or to share with him one's problems and to receive his advice, as some believe. Confession is primarily a moment when one analyzes one's own life, places oneself before God's righteous judgment, looks at oneself and says: this is what I have succeeded to do; this is my shortcoming; and this is my sin.

Indeed, very often people do not notice their shortcomings and sins at all. It seems to them that everything is all right in their life, and shortcomings are something that other people have. Instead of trying to improve themselves they begin to correct other people's shortcomings. But actually people tend to yield to influences and changes from outside much less than in the course of their inner work to improve themselves. As a result, one comes into continued conflict between oneself and people around because one sees the speck of sawdust in the other's eye and does not see the plank in one's own eye, as the Saviour says.

The Sacrament of Confession helps a person to realize in a very quiet and clear way what separates him from God and to receive through the priest's prayer and pardon a new strength to struggle with these sinful passions. And even if the confession has not brought any radical change in one's way of life, still confession is needed as a moment when one reminds oneself of one's Christian duty and Christian calling. And the most important thing is the moment when the Lord's hand touches one through the hand of a priest and helps one to find new spiritual resources.

Every church Sacrament gives one an opportunity to find a new quality of life. This is why it is so important that one should not be just a Christian by conviction but a Christian by one's way of life. This is why it is important for people not only to confess Christianity as their religion but also to be church people. It is necessary to remember that being a church member and confessing Christian faith is what makes a radical and positively transforming impact on one's morals.

'Walking before God'

A Christian is not only a person who confesses that Christ is God incarnate and not only a person who makes regular confession, takes communion and comes to church on Sundays and feast days. A Christian is a person whose whole life is directed to the gospel's ideals and Christian spiritual and moral values, who verifies his whole life and every action and word with the very high standard of Christ's teaching.

This responsibility lies on us all and especially on the younger generation of Christians. We should take our Christian calling very seriously and responsibly, look after our own life, read the Gospel and works of the holy fathers not only to draw information from them about the basics of our faith but also to learn from them what we should live up to and how we should behave. A real Christian is only the one who can live according to the Gospel, for whom Christianity is not merely an intellectual belief, a world outlook, but the way of life – the one whose life is imbued with the feeling of God's presence and standing before the Lord.

We know the expression 'to walk before God' from the Old Testament. We read in the Bible about kings who walked before God and did 'what is pleasant in God's eyes' and about those who did not walk before God but worshipped idols. Today the youth cherish many false ideals which they worship as idols. It is important that one should not give in to the temptations of the world around or worship these false idols. It is necessary for us to have Christ as our only spiritual and moral guide so that our way of life and behaviour could be determined by the absolute values which constitute the foundation of the Church's spiritual and moral teaching.

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