



Metropolitan Hilarion: actions of the Patriarch of Constantinople in Ukraine have become a kind of natural disaster for the entire world Orthodoxy

On 19th September 2020, in the Church and the World TV programme broadcast by Russia-24 channel on Saturdays and Sundays, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations, answered questions of the programme's host, Yekaterina Gracheva.

Ye. Gracheva: Hello, this is the Church and the World programme, in which we ask questions to the chairman of the Department for External Church Relations, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk. How do you do, Vladyka!

Metropolitan Hilarion: How do you do, Yekaterina! How do you do, dear brothers and sisters!

Ye. Gracheva: In our previous programme we raised the topic of vaccination against COVID-19. You advised all the parishioners to have vaccination, if they can. It caused a lot of comments, and in addition to that, the mass media reported that you yourself had had coronavirus. When was it and why have you not made it known before?

Metropolitan Hilarion: I came down with coronavirus straight after Easter. At the time, one priest from my church got infected and either I caught it from him, or he from me. Anyway, we fell sick at the same time. He was severely ill, while I had a relatively mild COVID-19 case. I had single pneumonia. Fifteen percent of my right lung were infected. I received home treatment, taking antibiotics under medical supervision, and, of course, observing lockdown restrictions. As you remember, we recorded all our programmes just as we are doing now: I stayed at home all the time. Having recovered, I continued to observe lockdown rules, as it was prescribed.

Why did I not make this public? For several reasons. Firstly, there is such notion as doctor-patient confidentiality. Every person has the right to go public with the information about his/her diseases or not to talk about them. Had I told someone about my illness at the time, at the height of the pandemic, then the information would have appeared in the press and they would not have left me alone, bothering me with phone calls, asking how I feel. I would have made many people worry, and it was far from what I wanted. Since I had a relatively mild case of the disease, I did not deem it necessary to inform anyone except His Holiness the Patriarch, who knew about it.

Ye. Gracheva: Vladyka, what are doctors saying: why did you need to be vaccinated against coronavirus if you developed immunity? Am I right that the risk of reinfection is high?

Metropolitan Hilarion: This is what the doctors are saying: even if there is immunity, it will most likely not last very long. Therefore, it is recommended to those who had coronavirus to be vaccinated once. In two or three weeks they undergo a test to find out how many antibodies they have. If a person has not had the disease, usually he/she is vaccinated in two steps: first one shot, then one more.

Why do I advise my parishioners to have vaccination, if they can? Because, although the vaccine testing has not been completed yet, the risk to get infected is great and increasing now. I know several people who had severe cases of coronavirus. Before my very eyes several of my acquaintances died from COVID-19. So I know well what this is, what risks the disease entails. And it seems to me that a risk of vaccination is much lower than a risk of getting infected with unpredictable after-effects. As for the risk of reinfection, yes, it exists, as far as I know. I am aware of several such cases: people who had coronavirus, say, in May, then got infected again in August or early September.

Ye. Gracheva: Several days ago Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia visited the Department for External Church Relations which you head. This department is also called “Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church.” You have been working there for a quarter of a century now. And the Patriarch came to the Department to congratulate you and note the high quality of its work. Yet, your critics note that it is at the time of your chairmanship that the severance of relations with Constantinople occurred, putting the blame on you. How would you respond to this criticism?

Metropolitan Hilarion: Of course, someone might blame the Minister of Foreign Affairs, because the severance of diplomatic relations between Russia and Ukraine occurred while he was in office. Someone might blame the Minister of Health, because the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic occurred while he was in office. And someone might blame the head of the Hydrometeorological Centre, because there were too many rains, thunderstorms and, perhaps, even tempests in some regions while he was in office. Yet, there are things that are in our power and there are things that are not in our power at all. What I could do in my capacity as the DECR chairman I did, and I continue to exert every effort in order to protect the interests of our Church.

Indeed, our Synodal department is sometimes called “Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Church.” However, over the recent years it has been more often functioning as a kind of church “ministry of defence,” because our task has been to defend our Church’s external frontiers from enemies. Of course, we can predict our ill-wishers’ actions, just like the head of the Hydrometeorological Centre predicts and warns people about natural disasters, but we cannot do anything about such calamities.

The actions of the Patriarch of Constantinople in Ukraine are a kind of natural disaster for the entire world Orthodoxy. In no way we are responsible for that. All these years we have done nothing to the prejudice of the Patriarch of Constantinople. On the contrary, we regularly informed him of our position and warned him about the consequences of the actions that he had intended to take, that is to say, we did all that could be done to prevent those actions. Our warnings were ignored and those actions took place, so our task now is to deal with their consequences and minimise the harm inflicted on the world Orthodoxy by the actions of the Patriarch of Constantinople.

I think that, in the first place, he did a great harm to himself, his reputation, his ministry, for now it is impossible to take him seriously as the head of the Orthodox Church, as the first among equals. He himself voluntarily gave up this function. In the second place, there has been no healing of the schism in Ukraine. On the contrary, the schism has deepened and now it affects not only Ukraine, but many other countries, other Local Churches as well. Our task is to minimise the aftermaths of this schism.

And the main result of the past years is that we have preserved our Church in her unity: all those who were members of our Church have remained united with her. I think this is the main result of all the external activities of our Church over the recent years.

Ye. Gracheva: Vladyka, actor Mikhail Yefremov has been found guilty and sentenced to eight years in prison. But I would like to ask you about the following: in August Mikhail Yefremov came to one of the hearings in a T-shirt with a slogan which is considered extremist in our country – “Orthodoxy or Death.” This slogan came from Greece. Could you tell more about its origins? And what is your attitude in general to the people who print such slogans on their clothes?

Metropolitan Hilarion: This slogan is chiefly used by schismatics who use it to justify their actions as though in defence of Orthodoxy, but in reality against the canonical Church. That is why the canonical Church does not approve of the use of such formidable formulas.

Ye. Gracheva: Vladyka, as a priest, what words of guidance could you say to Mikhail Yefremov now?

Metropolitan Hilarion: Firstly, I would like to say to him that it is not the end of the world and not the end of his life. He will have to learn to live in new circumstances and wait until release. Secondly and most importantly, I would like to say to him – take the Gospel with you and read it every day. Remember the example of Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoyevsky. He was convicted of a crime against the government, sentenced to death by shooting, and then at the last minute the shooting was commuted to eight years: four years of hard labour and four years of soldiering.

The only book allowed in prison was the Gospel. Dostoyevsky had with him the New Testament published in 1823, which had been given to him by the wife of one of the Decembrists upon his arrival in the Tobolsk prison. Dostoyevsky never parted with the book. He read it from cover to cover and made great many notes in it. In fact, this book changed his life. He returned from prison a changed man. I would like to wish to Mikhail Olegovich Yefremov to read the Gospel. May it change your life.

Ye. Gracheva: Vladyka, there is one more news that I would ask you to comment: Gérard Depardieu has recently converted to Orthodoxy, but we should note that earlier he converted to Islam and Buddhism and said that to complete the picture, he only had to convert to Judaism. What do you think of the fact that the man changes his religion so often? Isn't such approach to the sacrament superficial, to say the least?

Metropolitan Hilarion: I would like to wish to Gérard Depardieu that Orthodoxy may become his final choice. The Orthodox Christian tradition is the religious tradition that enables every person to realize his/her spiritual and moral potential. Orthodoxy is the treasury and one can spend the whole life discovering its riches. If what preceded this choice was a long journey of religious searches, then I am very glad that this journey ends in the Orthodox Church.

I would like to remind everyone that Gérard Depardieu is a great actor, one of the greatest actors of the 20th century, in my opinion. He played in great many films. Be it dramatic, tragic or comical movies, he performed all his parts brilliantly. I am recalling one of his roles, Colonel Chabert, in a movie based on the novel of the same title by Balzac. If you have not watched this film, please do, because the depth with which Gérard Depardieu performed this role is amazing. I hope that with the same depth, with the same thoughtfulness he will approach the Orthodox faith and it will open up to him with all the facets which it reveals to a sincere believer.

Ye. Gracheva: Thank you very much, Vladyka, for answering our questions.

In the second part of the programme Metropolitan Hilarion answered questions from TV viewers, sent to the Church and the World website.

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