



Patriarch Kirill Gives Christmas Interview to Russia TV



On 7th January 2021 on the feast of Christ's Nativity Russia TV channel broadcast the traditional Christmas interview of His Holiness the Patriarch of Moscow and All Rus Kirill. The first hierarch of the Russian Orthodox Church answered questions put to him by the political analyst of the Russian All-State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company and anchorman for Vesti news programme Andrei Kondrashov.

The text issued by the Press Service of the Patriarch of Moscow and All Rus is published here in a shortened version.

Your Holiness, thank you for this opportunity to conduct this traditional interview with you on the day of Christ's Nativity.

Thank you.

Allow me to ask you the first question. 2020 was a difficult and unusual year for all of us. What was this? A punishment, a trial? What has been sent down upon us?

It is absolutely right that what we see is called a pandemic. In translation from the Greek the word 'pandemic' means 'the entire people'. Indeed, all people, all of the human race has had to endure this danger. In the past there have been all sorts of epidemics, quite often dangerous ones. For example, the plague in Western Europe – it took the lives of half of the population of Europe, it was a terrible trial, and this is why this epidemic was called a pandemic. Well, today too this word is used in the right context as there is no place we can hide from this disease. In other words, it is quite an extraordinary phenomenon linked to a an extremely dangerous virus, and as such there can be no room for a superficial and cavalier approach to what is happening.

Unfortunately, there is an opinion abroad that this disease is somewhere else, that I won't catch it. Everyone today is falling ill – people in positions of authority, workers, the unemployed, old-age pensioners and the young, and so each person has to treat this disease in a particular way. And experience – especially the experience of history – has taught us that when society is able to take the appropriate consolidated anti-epidemic measures and use all necessary means, epidemics come to a halt. This was the case even in times of old. Let's take the epidemic of the seventeenth century – a plague which began in Moscow and which led to terrible consequences. A huge number of priests simply died, there was no one to celebrate the services, churches were closed. Moreover, it was impossible to bury people – it had been forbidden to bury in church cemeteries those who had died of the plague. We can imagine the terrible picture and awfulness and nightmare that Moscow then endured. But Moscow survived it and drew the appropriate conclusions, and these lessons were not only etched in Muscovites' memories but also were taken on board by the country's politicians. When in 1837 plague broke out in Odessa, the governor Count Vorontsov and the local archbishop of Chersones and Taurida Gabriel took joint decisions which we are today trying to emulate. I can imagine how archbishop Gabriel felt – at a time when churches played a central role in peoples' lives – when he ordered churches to be closed. Church buildings were closed for two months and after that access to them was limited: police detachments stood outside every church so that the number of people would not exceed the distance that had to be observed between them. And in addition to this it was not allowed to venerates crosses or icons. All of this has been documented historically and we know that it was sanctioned by the ecclesiastical authorities and supported by the state authorities.

Therefore, the fact that today we have to take anti-pandemic measures which sometimes cause people distress, including pious people, is no innovation. We are simply following in the tracks of our God-fearing ancestors. And as the measures they introduced did not give cause to suspect that the church authorities were acting in order to realize certain undeclared and dangerous aims, so too, I hope, today people trust those instructions which I have had to issue and which are aimed at limiting the chance of infection, including through attendance at worship in church.

Your Holiness, you will recall that during the first wave of the pandemic with your blessing

services took place in churches with the minimum number of people present, that is, priests, choir and servitors. In your view, has this not left a negative impression on priests and the faithful? After all, the churches of the Russian Orthodox Church have always been open for everyone and now this?

Let me share with you my own deeply felt experience. For me it was extremely painful and upsetting to have to appeal to people in public via television not to visit God's churches. All of my life, as I have already stated, has been dedicated to the opposite, that is, to calling upon people to go to church, to bringing people to church and to God. There is no other purpose to my life...

And then this happens...

And indeed, the Patriarch has to say: do not go to church. You know, it was hard not simply morally and spiritually but also physically to say these words. I was helped by the example of St. Mary of Egypt, the great fifth-century ascetic, who retreated to the desert and devoted all her life, decades, to living in the desert without visiting a church, and became a great saint of God. This means that in extraordinary circumstances it is quite possible not to go to church. But what should not be allowed to happen? Non-attendance of church should never weaken our faith, bring down the level of our life in the Church and worse still undermine the moral foundations of the Christian life. If alongside with non-attendance of church we cease to be good Christians or simply stop being Christians, then this is a great sin. But to be patient and wait awhile at a time when attending church could end up with very dangerous consequences for our health is also the duty of every Christian. Christians should look after themselves in order to accomplish future good deeds and to help their neighbour, and in general take care of themselves as this is the unfailing obligation of every person. This is why suicide is an unforgiveable sin. Life and health are a gift of God, and we bear responsibility for this gift. Therefore every act which can destroy human life and undermine peoples' health – even if this act is prompted by a good, or in this case bad will – is without doubt a sin.

Your Holiness, may I ask you about Belarus as this country is part of the pastoral responsibility of the Russian Orthodox Church? For some time now there was been an uneasy situation between the authorities and part of society. This is now fading away, yet nonetheless some things still remain. The Belarus exarchate has called for an end to the violence and to conduct dialogue. Could you please tell us how the Russian Orthodox Church on the whole reacts towards civil unrest of this sort and how it is possible in Belarus to attain national reconciliations and accord?

Well, firstly, we fully support metropolitan Benjamin, the new head of the exarchate of Belarus and of the Belarussian Orthodox Church and all the Belarussian episcopate who have appealed to the people

to stop the violence and go along the path of reconciliation. This appeal was made to everyone. The authorities permitted instances of unjustified violence and excessive use of force; yet on the side of the protesters there have also been instances of radical behaviour.

We have witnessed what happened in Ukraine. The word 'Maidan' now has a negative connotation. It is quite evident that the experience of Ukraine should teach all of us that change in society should happen in such a way that it is not accompanied by a growth in internal unrest and especially in the radicalization of relations between people. Indeed, how many revolutions and all sorts of coups have there been and yet where, by whom and by means of violent acts has peace, tranquility and prosperity have ever been achieved for society? After every revolution there is inevitably always a long period of rebuilding. Therefore, we should aim for what is best without destroying that which exists, while at the same time developing for the better, modernizing in the good sense of this word, improving both relations within society and the country as a whole.

This is why the appeal to Belarus, a country close to my heart and with which I have had close links during my time as metropolitan of Smolensk ... I am very fond of the people of Belarus; I love the city of Minsk and the cleanliness and order of the region ... So, this is why there is this pastoral appeal and pastoral advice: all issues should be resolved peacefully, but if there are issues, then they have to be resolved, and that is why I am appealing to the Belarussian authorities. It is wrong to put on a backburner issues which cause discord and unrest in society. Ways have to found for a wise, business-like discussion of problems with a view to concrete decisions. May God grant that all attempts to resolve these problems in Belarus through violent means will cease and may, through God's grace, dialogue develop between the authorities and the people, the authorities and society, with the participation of all forces, including the faith communities, aimed at stabilizing the situation and the general growth of fraternal Belarus.

Your Holiness, it is well-known that for a long time now you have been a participant in the peace process between Baku and Yerevan, something you do in conjunction with the religious leaders of both Azerbaijan and Armenia. There has recently been a worsening of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. Thank God, our peacekeepers are in place there now. What does the future hold, will there be peace – what do you think?

I personally hope that there will be peace and I go upon the stance taken by the church and religious authorities of both Armenia, Karabakh and Azerbaijan. You are aware that the Russian Orthodox Church initiated discussion of the Karabakh problem with the participation of the Catholicos of All Armenians and with the participation of the Grand Mufti of Azerbaijan Allahshükür Pashazadeh. We conducted several rounds of negotiations and reached agreement upon many things. And I believe that the main result of these negotiations was that the two religious leaders representing a majority of people

spoke with each other and that this discussion was very peaceful in the sense that there were no accusations and no tension. Although each had his own arguments, and these arguments were honestly expressed, there was no aggressive grinding of teeth when emotions take over and when dialogue practically degenerates into verbal warfare. Nothing of the sort took place, and this happened because it is the religious leaders who bear in full measure responsibility for the spiritual state of their nation. And what is a spiritual state? Whatever power takes the upper hand – whether it be the power of peace, love and tranquility or the power of evil – will determine too peoples' behaviour.

This is why the role of religious leaders is important – we of course do not exaggerate it, nor do we underestimate it. And it is true that in the course of these negotiations concrete results were attained – an exchange of prisoners, the refusal to use religious symbols and religious rhetoric or a religious motivation to incite the warring factions. In removing the religious factor from this conflict, we have undoubtedly taken the heat out of it and all that ensues from it. Therefore, without wishing to exaggerate the role of religious leaders, we should in no way ignore this role.

The Church of Russia is also ready to take part in this process in order to make her contribution to peace for the resolution of this very difficult problem which, unfortunately, at the present moment had been halted only by the presence of Russian peacekeepers. May God grant that the peace-keeping potential of religions replace that of those who bear arms to keep the two warring sides apart.

You have already mentioned the Maidan which resulted in a profound split in Ukrainian society. But there then followed a church schism. The Phanar (the Church of Constantinople) of course took advantage of the time and situation... And now we see how deep the schism is within the Church. In general, Your Holiness, do you think it is possible for Orthodox unity be attained and how can this be achieved?

The Phanar did not simply make a mistake, but committed a crime. I say this with a sense of great sadness. The Patriarch of Constantinople did what he did not off the top of his own head and not upon his own say so. I would like to definitely emphasize that he was acting not off the top of his own head or upon his own say so because I have information at my disposal that Patriarch Bartholomew was under pressure from powerful political forces emanating from one of the world superpowers. As we know, his position in Turkey is very complex and difficult. We always pray for the Patriarch of Constantinople being fully aware of how hard it is for him to fulfill his patriarchal ministry. And yet, nonetheless, at a certain moment – I have no desire to teach my brother – but at a certain moment, perhaps, he should have summoned up to strength to say 'no' to these political forces. I believe that Patriarch Bartholomew did not say this and was drawn into the conflict. And what was the logic of those who were behind Patriarch Bartholomew, of those who properly speaking stirred up this conflict? The logic was to tear Russia, Orthodox Russia away from her Orthodox brothers and sisters in the Mediterranean and the

Middle East. Because, as these strategic analysts believe, Orthodoxy has played and continues to play far too big a role in the formation of a spiritual and cultural commonality, and, if these ties between Orthodox Christians are not broken off, it would be impossible to destroy this spiritual commonality by using external factors. So, the intention is quite simple: tear the Russia Church away from the Orthodox Christians of Greece, the Arab world and the Middle East so that Orthodoxy itself would become weaker.

So, you believe that there will be such attempts in the future?

There will be such attempts in the future. Again, I have no desire to utter criticism towards my brother in Constantinople, but there can be no doubt that what happened afterwards in Constantinople, in Istanbul, is testimony to divine retribution. Patriarch Bartholomew has brought schismatics into the holy Church of Sophia in Kiev and lost the Church of Sophia in Constantinople as it has now become a mosque. I would like people to reflect upon what has happened. You have taken away the Church of St. Sophia in Kiev from Orthodox people, from the Orthodox Church, you have gone there and brought with you schismatics, and then you lost your own Church of St. Sophia... I believe that it is hard to imagine any clearer consequences resulting from God's command, and these consequences came about rapidly because the sin was too great. Yet we must come out of this together. We have to pray for each other, at least in our personal prayers, if this is now almost impossible in public worship since we no longer commemorate the Patriarch of Constantinople in the diptychs. Yet pray for each other we must and do all that which is within our power for this crisis in world Orthodoxy, imposed upon us from without, to be over as quickly as possible. The Russian Church is ready prepared to tread her part of this path in order to achieve this goal.

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