



Metropolitan Hilarion: President of Montenegro went against his own people

On May 23, 2020, in the Church and the World TV programme, broadcast on Saturdays and Sundays on Russia-24 news channel, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations, answered questions from its host, Yekaterina Gracheva.

Ye. Gracheva: Hello, this is the Church and the World talk show on Russia-24 channel. We are asking questions to the chairman of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, 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: We continue talking remotely, since we are both in Moscow, but the Russian regions are gradually loosening lockdown restrictions. Cafes, non-food stores and even beauty salons are opening in some of the regions. Of course, all believers want to know when they will be able to attend churches, participate in the Liturgy. How will this decision be taken – by the “federal centre,” i.e. the Patriarch, or, as is the case with secular authorities in the regions, each diocese will take it individually?

Metropolitan Hilarion: Decisions will be taken based on epidemiological situation in each particular place, and in our decision-making we will follow recommendations of the sanitary authorities. As we know, the situation still varies in different regions, but even in Moscow, where we continue to abide by lockdown restrictions, there are already a lot of cars on the streets, many people are travelling by underground, construction sites have reopened, so it is already impossible to say that lockdown restrictions are still applied to the full. And, of course, believers are asking a just question: when will it be possible to attend churches?

I very much hope that in the nearest future, in the next few days, we will receive permission from the Moscow sanitary authorities to, at least, open churches for believers between divine services so that they may come, light candles, submit commemoration lists, talk to a priest. The next step will be to open churches so that our parishioners could attend divine services, but, perhaps, provided that they follow certain rules: first, there should be a distance between worshippers; second, the total number of worshippers gathered for the Liturgy should be limited. That is to say, the decision will certainly be taken not by church authorities, but by secular ones, and depending on these decisions heads of churches in each region will determine the measures necessary for lifting quarantine. In Moscow it will be the

Patriarch, in other dioceses it will be diocesan hierarchs, abroad it will be heads of dioceses in respective countries.

Ye. Gracheva: At the date of recording our programme, Moscow, the Moscow Region and St. Petersburg still head the list of the regions most affected by COVID-19 as to the number of infected people. From the northern capital the news has recently come about a ban imposed on paying last respects to the dead regardless of the cause of death. Now everyone without exception is being buried in closed coffins. As doctors explain, it is because in a morgue those who had COVID-19 infection and those who died of other causes are in one room. Do you think that this measure is justified, or do people, nevertheless, have the right to pay their last respects to the deceased in the manner they feel necessary?

Metropolitan Hilarion: I believe that in taking such decisions the city authorities rely on expertise, but it is very important to explain to people the reasons behind these or those decisions. For instance, so far no one has clearly explained whether the coronavirus can be passed from the dead or not, and if it does, how much time it remains active. Perhaps, no one knows for sure, but if so, it also should be said. I believe that all the measures that are being taken now in order to save people's lives and minimise the risk of infection are justified and we should react to them with humility and patience.

Ye. Gracheva: Vladyka, here is another news: the World Russian People's Council, which is headed by His Holiness Patriarch Kirill, has filed a request with the Investigative Committee to investigate causes of the pandemic and to devote special attention to the area of vaccine production. The authors of the appeal are concerned that the virus could be created deliberately and that the vaccine may be developed outside Russia and therefore out of control of the Russian authorities. Generally speaking, this is already an intrusion of the Church into the political territory. Do you share these concerns? Can a pandemic be an instrument of political games and what does the Church have to do with it?

Metropolitan Hilarion: First of all, the World Russian People's Council is not the Church; it is a non-governmental organisation. The Patriarch heads it, because he was invited to. For example, the Patriarch also heads the Russian Literature and Language Society, but it does not mean that this Society is the Church.

As for the concern voiced by the World Russian People's Council, I think that it is justified and we really ought to receive an answer to the question about the origin of the virus. There are different theories. For example, there is a theory that the virus was developed in China and launched for the purpose of damaging the economy of other countries. There is also an opposite theory which exists, in particular, in China, that the virus was created in America and that the leakage happened there.

The World Health Organization called for an investigation into the virus's origin. I believe that if our country carries out its own investigation, it will help everyone. Indeed, we must learn where the virus came from, for many reasons, in particular, in order to understand how and when the vaccine will be developed, because if it emerged due to natural causes, it is one story, but if it was created deliberately, then it is another story. Besides, many are saying now that, probably, this virus is a new biological weapon and that somebody may be testing this biological weapon on people. This theory should also be investigated.

Yet, I would also like to note the following. Apart from possibilities of biological warfare, there is a possibility of bio-psychological warfare. When people are scared of what is going on, of the virus's wild outburst and of the danger in which they and their relatives have found themselves, they begin to lose immunity, focusing on something negative and ignoring positive things – it is a very dangerous psychological situation, and that is what psychologists are saying more and more often these days.

That is why, regardless of the investigation into possible causes of the virus, I would like to call upon all our TV viewers to devote as much attention as they can to their own spiritual and bodily health. In order to beat the virus, we all need very strong immunity, and this immunity is acquired not only on the physical level, but on the spiritual one as well.

Ye. Gracheva: Vladyka, let us go on to other international news. They also raise a question of whether politics are involved or not. The Montenegrin police released Orthodox Bishop Joanikije and other priests of the Serbian Orthodox Church who had been detained on a charge of organising a mass gathering at the time of pandemic. The arrest of the clergymen and the criminal case against them brought about mass protests. The priests were released, but they still face imprisonment of up to one year. In your view, is it a lawful demand of the Ministry of Health or is the quarantine just a pretext for attacks against the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro, which already occurred before?

Metropolitan Hilarion: We should realise and clearly state that President of Montenegro Đukanović went against his own people. And the fact that he openly speaks against the Church and tries to create some kind of new church there indicates that, first, he does not understand what the Church is in her essence and, second, he does not understand his own people. The Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro is not some foreign organisation; it is the Church of the Montenegrin people. If Mr. Đukanović, who, as far as I know, is an unbaptised and unreligious person, is trying to create his own church, it is a very big mistake. Such mistake was already made by former President of Ukraine Poroshenko: he tried to take advantage of the situation and play the church card in order to score points in the election contest. As we know, that reckless scheme led him to the shameful and disgraceful defeat in the elections. I am sure that Mr. Đukanović will suffer the same sad fate if he does not reconsider his position, if he does not stop persecuting the canonical Montenegrin Orthodox Church, I

underscore, the Montenegrin Orthodox Church not by name, but because it is the Church of the Montenegrin people, and if Mr. Đukanović does not realise that, he may look at the crowds of people who went out on the streets to show solidarity with the bishop mured in prison.

I think that the best way to violate all the coronavirus restrictions is to take an Orthodox bishop and put him in prison, because then people will certainly go out on the streets. And these violations will not be on the conscience of the Church, for it was not the Church that organised these protests. The violations will be on the conscience of those who created this situation, first of all, on the conscience of Mr. Đukanović himself. I hope that my words will reach him. I know that what I said in our previous programmes reached him. And it is my great hope that he will reconsider his position.

Ye. Gracheva: Let us hope that he is watching our programme.

Metropolitan Hilarion: I do not know whether he is watching it or not, but the Ambassador of Montenegro to Moscow is certainly watching. He will tell him what we were talking about.

Ye. Gracheva: In conclusion I would like to ask you to comment on such news: this week Patriarch Kirill has removed two bishops from the administration of their dioceses. The official reasons are unknown. Only Telegram channels are playing up the topic, but so that we may not rely on unofficial sources, please, tell us on behalf of the Church, for what offences were they dismissed?

Metropolitan Hilarion: I cannot tell you anything, because there is a very strict rule in the Church that we all observe: not to divulge any details until a person is convicted. There is such notion as “presumption of innocence” and there is also such notion as “confidentiality of investigation.” These notions exist in church legal proceedings as well. The bishops were dismissed prior to a decision of the ecclesiastical court, and when the court delivers its judgement, accusations against them will be set forth.

Some people are asking: how could the Patriarch single-handedly dismiss the hierarchs? According to the Statute of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Patriarch takes such kind of decisions himself in the event that a particular hierarch falls under the jurisdiction of the ecclesiastical court. It means that the decision is being taken in an urgent manner, it needs to be taken before a session of the Holy Synod is convened. Of course, the Holy Synod will examine the situation after the ecclesiastical court pronounces its judgement.

I would like to remind you that five hierarchs, including these two, have already been removed from the administration of their dioceses this year: two – by a decision of the Holy Synod, and three – by a decision of the Patriarch. What does it mean? It means that some people, including those holding senior posts in the Church, have certain personal problems. It also means that the Church has a well-

established system of control, and if the church centre receives reports that someone is not up to the task of governing, then no one, neither a bishop, nor a metropolitan, has immunity. Everyone accounts not only to God and to his conscience, but also to the ecclesiastical court, and in the event that an offence or a crime is committed, to the secular court as well.

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

Metropolitan Hilarion: Thank you, Yekaterina.

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

Question: Vladyka, what music do you recommend believers to listen and what music do you like best? Who is your favourite composer?

Metropolitan Hilarion: I recommend believers, as well as non-believers, to listen to classical music. It is a wonderful world of music, as well as of feelings and emotions. It is the art that ennobles human soul and can impact on a person of any age, any upbringing, speaking any language. In order to understand the language of music one does not need to study foreign languages. What one needs is to open his/her heart and learn to listen, because listening to classical music requires certain skills, just like, for example, reading poetry or scholarly writings. If you have never listened to classical music, you may not enter into this world at once, but there is no such person who could not embrace this world, and in order to listen to this music, no special knowledge is required.

As for the composers that I like best, I would put Johann Sebastian Bach in the first place, of course. He not only composed very beautiful music; his music is remarkable for its special spiritual depth. So while in quarantine, I try to listen to Bach regularly, and this music cheers me up.

Question: Could you explain, please, why did the Russian Church grant autocephaly to the Orthodox Church in America, if the very issue of the right to grant autocephaly has not been clarified in Orthodoxy? On what grounds did our Church do that?

Metropolitan Hilarion: It was done 50 years ago, in 1970, first of all, on the grounds that the Orthodoxy was brought to America by the Russian missionaries and for a long time (over a century) the Russian Orthodox Church was the only Orthodox Church on the American continent.

As far back the 18th century, monks from the Valaam Monastery came to Alaska and founded a mission there. In the early 20th century the Orthodox Church on the American continent was headed by Bishop

Tikhon (Belavin), future Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia. Later on, in the 1920s and 30s, other Orthodox jurisdictions were established in America, but the jurisdiction created by the Russians and governed by the Russian hierarchs continued to exist and received autocephaly from the Russian Orthodox Church.

Why was the autocephaly granted unilaterally? Because back then many Local Orthodox Churches believed that granting autocephaly was a prerogative of the Church that had founded a particular local Church. Then, in the 1990s and 2000s, an attempt was made at the pan-Orthodox level to resolve the matter of how autocephaly would be granted in future. A document was practically finalized, which stipulated that in future autocephaly would be granted only with the consent of all the Local Orthodox Churches. However, the document was not ratified and was later blocked in Constantinople and removed from the agenda of the Council of Crete, during which, according to an initial programme, it was to be discussed. And now the Patriarch of Constantinople, claiming that those agreements never took place, unilaterally granted autocephaly to the Ukrainian schismatics.

Therefore, the issue of how autocephaly will be granted in future has not been resolved at the pan-Orthodox level. Yet, at the time of granting autocephaly to the Orthodox Church in America this process was seen as I have described it now.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the granting of autocephaly to the Orthodox Church in America, which over these years has come a long way, having grown into an independent large national Church. Serving there are chiefly Americans, both hierarchs and the absolute majority of priests, and the Liturgy is celebrated in the English language. This Church has a remarkable education centre – St. Vladimir’s Theological Seminary. It was also founded by the Russian emigrants, but for many decades now its students have been studying in the English language.

I would like to conclude this programme with the words of our Lord Jesus Christ from the Gospel According to John. These words are about the unity of Christians: “I pray... that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us” (Jn 17:20-21).

I wish you all the best, and may the Lord bless you all!

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