Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk meets with students of the St. Genevieve of Paris Religious Education Center



On November 29, 2018, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, head of the Moscow Patriarchate department for external church relations (DECR) and rector of Ss Cyril and Methodius Institute of Post-Graduate Studies (CMI), met with the faculty and students of the St. Genevieve of Paris Religious Education Center of the Russian Orthodox Church diocese of Chersonese.

Participating in the meeting were also Bishop Nestor of Chersonese, Father Maxim Politov, sacristan of the Cathedral of the Holy Trinity, Hieromonk Alexander (Sinyaov), rector of the center, and the faculty members.

Greeting the St. Genevieve Center students, Metropolitan Hilarion said:

‘I am very pleased by the fact that, thanks to the St. Genevieve Religious Education Center, students from Russia, Ukraine and other countries of the canonical responsibility of the Russian Orthodox Church have an opportunity to come to Paris to receive here a high-level education. I can see that you have

various academic interests beginning from Bible studies and patristics to various subjects concerning the life of people in modern society. I very much hope that your education in France will help you broaden your horizon and master French and other foreign languages. But most importantly I wish you that all that you will learn here may then be 'brought to the feet of Christ', as St. Gregory the Theologian said, who received a very good education to measure to his time and that all that you will master here may then benefit the Church.

'I think that each of you has embarked on the path of service of the Church because you themselves have chosen this path. But before you chose it, you yourselves were chosen by the Lord Jesus Christ otherwise you would not have found yourselves in a seminary if the Lord had not chosen you for the service at some point on your life journey. I want you always to remember this. You are not mere students; you are called to the apostolic ministry, and the Lord was pleased to have you born precisely at this time so that you may serve Him for the time He has measured for each of you here on earth.

'When we think over the life of our previous generations – our parents, grandfathers and grandmothers, we understand that they lived in particular circumstances and had no such opportunities as we have today. In particular, the opportunities for preaching the Gospel and living a full-fledged church life not reduced down to the limit. Nowadays these opportunities are available for each of us, but the missionary field we see before us remains as vast as before. The Lord said to His disciples: 'Open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest' (Jn. 4:35), or 'The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few' (Lk. 10:2); these words are relevant today as well.

'You are all called by the Lord to become workers in His field. It means that the Lord expects from you the maximal output. This output, already now as you study, should be manifested in enriching your academic and spiritual potential every day without wasting your time or making it free of content.

The training in a seminary, university, academy always presupposes two components – intellectual and spiritual. Now, in this religious-cultural center, a conference is held devoted to Vladimir Lossky, an example of the theologian who combined in himself a high level of academic knowledge with a deep and sincere Christian spirituality. He was not a clergyman; he was a layman but for him the Church was not a mere subject of intellectual interest. He combined his academic work with the service of God not as a priest but as an altar servant, and certainly as a theologian. And for him, theology – as he always stressed in his books – was not just an intellectual engagement. Lossky said that theology is inseparable from spiritual, 'mystical' life, as he described it; that is, coming in touch with God through prayer, church sacraments, and contemplation, which is the principal content of our Christian life.

'I wish that the studies, which will enrich you spiritually, may be combined with continued spiritual growth, so that you may go from strength to strength and that the riches of church tradition may be

revealed to you ever more fully through academic knowledge.

‘Vladimir Lossky shows another striking example of a man who, being profoundly Orthodox in his spirit and outlook, was forced by the circumstances of the time and place in which he had to live for most of his life to defend the Orthodox tradition in face of the non-Orthodox world. He did it very delicately, gracefully and competently. Each of you is in a similar situation today: you live in a non-Orthodox milieu, communicate with other students who do not belong to the Orthodox faith, and for many of you the very academic work is an opportunity for looking into your own tradition not only from inside but also from outside.

‘I found myself in a similar situation for the first time when I happened to be trained in Oxford. I chose as the subject of my dissertation the life and teaching of St. Symeon the New Theologian who, just as Lossky, combined theology with a deep mystical spiritual experience. The theme of my dissertation was this: ‘St. Symeon the New Theologian and the Orthodox Tradition’. I set myself the task to consider the teaching of St. Symeon from inside the church tradition to which we all belong. This tradition is traced to the Lord Jesus Christ Himself and His apostles and it is rooted in Holy Scriptures and the liturgy of the Orthodox Church. But when I began describing all this for potential readers who did not belong to the Orthodox tradition, I realized that very many things obvious for us and taken for granted are not intelligible for those outside the Orthodox tradition, and we have to explain them in a way that would appreciate it and hold their interest.

‘Each of you has this precious opportunity. That is, on one hand, you can learn your own tradition ever more deeply, but on the other, your life in a non-Orthodox milieu gives you an opportunity for looking at it not only from inside but also as if from outside and thus realize how this treasure can be handed over to others. The missionary field is open now for each of us; it consists of people who associate themselves to this or that extent with the Orthodox tradition but who are not inchurched and who know very little about the essence of the Orthodox faith. And our task, having studied our own tradition from inside, is to use this opportunity for handing it over to those who are external to it even if they claim to be Orthodox.

‘I have to come in contact with people who sincerely sympathize with the Orthodox Church and identify themselves with it. But their knowledge of the doctrine, theology, Holy Scriptures, Jesus Christ, His life and teaching, are almost none. And when you ask such people whether they read the Gospel it turns out that they do not read it. Each has a copy of the Gospel at home, but it does not occur to them that the Gospel is a book for reading. At best this book lies on a shelf or, may be, on the bedside table. But they do not read it, not to mention the works of holy fathers and the liturgy, which remains unintelligible for many. People come to church for years, ‘stand out’ the Liturgy, know its beginning and end and the parts it consists of but do not understand its meaning.

‘We should explain all this to people, and, most importantly, not just explain what the Orthodox Church, Holy Scripture and the liturgy are, but tell them all this in such a way that they may be taken with it and understand that they need it and realize that the life in God may radically change their life.

When we read the Gospel together with you, we pay attention to the fact that the Lord Jesus Christ keeps speaking about the Heavenly Kingdom but never explains what it is. He keeps mentioning it, gives examples but does not say what the Heavenly Kingdom is. Why? – I thing because it is absolutely impossible to reduce the Heavenly Kingdom to a formula. The Heavenly Kingdom is a being that exists in parallel with our material life and we can participate in this life through prayer, church sacraments and life in God. The Heavenly Kingdom is not just something that will come for virtuous people after their death. It is what people come to participate in here and now. But to have the Heavenly Kingdom open up before them they should wish to graft on the vine which is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself so that they could be nourished from this vine by its life-giving flows. And here our apostolic mission is needed.

‘I would like to wish each of you that you, who have embarked on the path of this apostolic ministry, may never leave it, that each may use his abilities and resources to bring forth the fruit that the Lord expects from you, that you may not earth the talents that the Lord has given you but could use your life and knowledge to serve the holy Church of Christ’.

Then Metropolitan Hilarion answered questions from students about burning problems of organizing today’s life of the Russian Orthodox Church and possible areas for developing inter-Christian dialogue

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