



Metropolitan Hilarion: It is important that the mass media do not distort what church hierarchs say

Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations, is celebrating the 30th anniversary of his church ministry on August 19. In his interview to RIA Novosti news agency, Metropolitan Hilarion told about "great and minor" miracles in his life, about the effect on him over the years of his service abroad of "the atmosphere in the Western countries," about the visit to Moscow of the Vatican's Secretary of State Pietro Parolin, about the future of Orthodoxy in Ukraine, as well as shared his reflections on how the secular mass media deal with the Church-related issues.

- Vladyka, you were ordained hieromonk 30 years ago, on 19 August 1987, on the Feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord. What does the Transfiguration mean to you? Have you ever experienced any miracles that would strengthen your faith in God?

- The Transfiguration is a special feast. It reminds us about the Divine light that was revealed to the Saviour's disciples on Tabor. When celebrating the Divine Liturgy, we ascend our own Tabor and partake of this uncreated light. I am infinitely grateful to God for the opportunity to stand before God's Altar and celebrate the Liturgy for thirty years already.

There have been many miracles in my life, both great and minor. I feel that the Lord leads me, teaches me and makes me wiser through various circumstances of my life. Every day is a wonder. And there are many such miracles that seem unnoticed by other people. For instance, when you see the transfiguration of a person's soul as he/she participates in church life, Holy Communion, and prayer. We, clergymen, see this miracle happen all the time and rejoice at it.

- You do much in the sphere of theological education. The 6th volume of your epic work entitled "Jesus Christ. Life and Teaching" has just been released. As far as I know, the history of the Russian Church has not known a work of such scale that would be dedicated to the Founder of Christianity. What made you write it?

- Three years ago during one of the sessions of the Supreme Church Council, His Holiness the Patriarch noted the necessity to update the entire corpus of undergraduate study materials for theological schools. I was charged to head a working group established to implement this large-scale project which implied writing at least sixty new course books. Almost simultaneously we launched some fifteen projects in collaboration with individual authors and teams. Some one hundred people are currently involved in the

project.

When a draft of the New Testament course book was presented to me, I realized that its authors intended to focus exclusively on contemporary scholarly theories relating to the Gospel, and did not intend to comment the text itself. My desire was that our students would, first and foremost, read the Gospel, be well acquainted with it, know the differences between the narratives of the four Gospels, and would be able to compare them. So finally, I myself set pen to paper and began writing. The amount of material rapidly increased, and three years of work resulted in these six volumes that are now being used as the foundation for course books on the Four Gospels. The text of the course book's first volume (based on the first two volumes in the series) had been read and approved by His Holiness Patriarch, and then, after the book was published, I presented it to the Supreme Church Council. His Holiness is now reading the second volume (it is dedicated to the miracles and parables of Jesus), and we are working on the third one.

- What effect did the life and ministry in England and Austria have on you? In these countries, there is a very strong desire, common to the whole Europe, to “democratize” religious traditions. Is it a serious challenge for an Orthodox Christian today to live for a long time in such atmosphere?

- I cannot say that the atmosphere in the Western countries affected me somehow. I always lived in my own world, governed by the cycle of church feasts and divine services, as well as by numerous obediences entrusted to me by the Church, and by the theological work which I have been doing almost incessantly all the years of my service.

- In late August, the Vatican's Secretary of State, Pietro Parolin, will visit Moscow. What expectations do you as the head of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations have of this visit? What topics are on the agenda? Will there be discussed the implementation of the Joint Declaration signed by Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill during their historic meeting in Havana in February 2016? What problems still exist in the inter-Christian relations and which are the ways to settle them, in your opinion? In what spheres and for what reasons do the Churches need to promote cooperation today? Is there a possibility that Pope Francis might visit Russia or Patriarch Kirill the Vatican in the near future?

- So far there have been no plans of such top-level exchange visits. There is still a long way ahead of us in order to implement everything outlined during that historic meeting between the Pope and the Patriarch in Havana. Of course, the talks with Cardinal Parolin will, first of all, be dedicated to that. We have an extensive catalogue of topics which we discuss at every meeting. It includes the protection of

persecuted Christians in the Middle East who are still living in an extremely difficult situation, as well as the situation in Ukraine, where schismatics continue to commit their outrageous acts, seizing our churches, where the adoption of discriminatory bills is being prepared, and where various forces, including the Uniates, act against the canonical Orthodox Church. It also includes the defense of traditional family values and many other issues.

- In the light of recent serious success of the government forces in Syria and Iraq, is there a hope that the Christian population will be preserved in the region? What is your prognosis?

- It is our great desire that peace might be re-established in the long-suffering Syrian land. We pray for it and do all we can to make it happen. We must exert every effort to preserve the Christian population in the region where the Christianity came into being.

- The Ukrainian authorities have repeatedly asked the Patriarchate of Constantinople to recognize the “autocephaly” of the Ukrainian Church, its independence from the Moscow Patriarchate. Constantinople has so far given no official response. Do you know anything about their position, perhaps, from your personal meetings? And what can you say about the prospects of Orthodoxy in Ukraine?

- I believe that the schism will be overcome and that the Ukrainian Orthodoxy will be united. However, it is impossible to overcome the schism by the absorption of the canonical Church by the schismatics, as some Ukrainian politicians are now proposing. The only way to return from the schism is through repentance. And there is no need to create a unified Ukrainian Church: it exists already, and its canonicity is recognized by each and all Local Orthodox Churches. As for the canonicity of the schismatics, it is recognized by no one.

His Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople has repeatedly expressed his support to the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church, emphasizing that he recognizes His Beatitude Metropolitan Onufry as the only canonical Primate of the Orthodox Church in Ukraine. And I have no doubts that the Patriarchate of Constantinople will adhere to this position in future as well. It cannot be otherwise, for we have one family of Orthodox Churches. And if a schism occurs in one Church, the other Churches regard it as nothing but schism.

- In the recent years, you have headed the editorial board of the official church periodical – the Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate. What are, in your opinion, the major problems and “challenges” facing today the church and secular mass media that deal with the Church-related and religious topics? What do they need in order to win the information war, if there is such a war?

- It is important the mass media do not distort, be it deliberately or not, what the church hierarchs say. Regrettably, we have been facing it more and more often recently. As a result, an erroneous, false image of the Church is being created. Over and over again, we see headlines that say something like “The ROC calls to ban...,” “The ROC requires banning...,” and so on. Yet, when you read the text itself, you find no calls to ban something. What might be there at most are some reflections on what is good and what is bad. However, a biting headline does its part. We should not forget that many people today read headlines only, and not the texts.

Here is a recent example from my life. During “The Church and the World” TV-programme I was asked what advice I could give to the parents who want to send their children to study abroad. What I said in response was literally the following, “It is not bad at all for children, young boys and girls, to study abroad. I myself studied at Oxford University for two years, and for my scholarly progress it did much more than the previous years of studies at the Moscow Theological Seminary and Academy, and the previous years when I had studied on my own, with books, course books, and manuals of different sort.”

Then I told that the Church also sends students abroad and receives students from other countries on a regular basis. We even have the special Student Exchange Commission which I head as the chairman of the Department for External Church Relations. According to my personal records, there are some one hundred students from our theological schools who are now studying abroad, in Greece, Serbia, Italy, America, Switzerland, and Germany, and approximately the same number of students from other countries is studying here. As I noted in the TV-programme, student exchange “is a right process, for it enables people to broaden horizons.”

At the same time I pointed out to some inevitable drawbacks – that is to the fact that if the students whom we send abroad do not come back and stay there, “it is not very good for the country, because thus we lose people.” In the same context I mentioned what might be a risk of sending children abroad, saying, “When I am asked such questions, which is often, I always try to have an all-round vision of the. If there is a risk that the child will not come back, then, of course, I do not advise parents to send him/her abroad.”

That phrase alone sufficed to cause numerous headlines, such as, “ROC representative advises against sending children to study abroad,” “ROC representative says about harmful effects of sending children to study abroad,” etc. They just ignored everything I said about the benefits of studying abroad, and that one phrase about the possible risks caused a gust of comments. For instance, Mr. Oleg Smolin, first deputy chairman of the State Duma’s Committee on Education and Science, a member of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, while on air of the “Echo of Moscow” radio station says, as if in response to me, that it is inefficient to introduce any restrictions on sending children to study

abroad, and that it contradicts the Constitution of the Russian Federation. He adds, “None of church hierarchs can change the Constitution and the existing legislation.” What does the Constitution have to do with it? Who mentioned the legislation, or restrictions, or bans? It is obvious that the esteemed deputy did not watch the programme; he just saw the headline somewhere and decided to give his comment.

I could give many other similar examples, when you send out one signal, and it is refracted in the mass media in such a way that in the result it is a completely different signal. It is my great wish that the certain mass media pay closer attention to the quality of information that they present.

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