Metropolitan Hilarion's pilgrimage to Holy Mount Athos



Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, head of the Moscow Patriarchate department for external church relations (DECR), with the blessing of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, was on a visit to Holy Mount Athos from March 11 to 13, 2017.

During the same days, Bishop Antoniy of Bogorodsk, head of the Moscow Patriarchate office for institutions abroad, began his working visit to Mount Athos.

Upon his arrival to the Holy Mountain, Metropolitan Hilarion, together with Bishop Antoniy, visited the New Phivaida hermitage, which belongs to the Russian Monastery of St. Panteleimon, to see the progress of the large-scale restoration work carried out in the skete.

Then the pilgrims went to Karyes, where they were received by the Protoepistatis of the Mount Athos Holy Epistasia, Father Barnabas of the Vatopedi monastery. Having venerated the Icon of Our Lady 'It is Meet and Right' at the church of the Dormition, the guests went to the Iviron monastery, where

Metropolitan Hilarion venerated the Ivirion Icon of Our Lady and read the acathistus in Greek.

Having later that day come to the St. Panteleimon monastery, the pilgrims prayed at Small Vespers followed by All-Night Vigil, at the Holy Protomartyr Panteleimon church.

On March 12, the 2nd Sunday of Great Lent, Metropolitan Hilarion celebrated the Divine Liturgy at the cathedral church. He was assisted by Bishop Antoniy, Father Superior Archimandrite Yevlogiy, brethren and members of the pilgrims group in holy orders.

After the dismissal, Metropolitan Hilarion delivered a sermon:

> 'Your Grace,
>
> Very Reverend Father Yevlogiy,
>
> Dear Fathers and Brothers:
>
> I cordially greet you on behalf of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, who asked me to convey to all of you his Primatial blessing. Every day He prays for Holy Mount Athos, the monastery of the Holy Martyr and Healer Panteleimon and for all the brethren in Christ of this holy monastery.
>
> I am delighted at the opportunity, with the Patriarchal blessing, to celebrate here the Divine Liturgy on the commemoration day of St. Gregory Palamas, Archbishop of Thessaloniki. It is not accidental that his memory is honoured on the second Sunday of Great Lent because St. Gregory, as we heard during the matins canon, is 'the second important theologian' after the first one, namely, St. Gregory the Theologian, Archbishop of Constantinople who lived in the 3th century.
>
> St. Gregory Palamas lived ten centuries later but the Church glorifies his as 'the second Theologian' because it fell to his lot to safeguard the Church against a dangerous heresy and formulate the very important doctrine of the divine light and the essence and actions of God.
>
> In our time, few understand the meaning of these doctrines and the significance of the disputes developed in Constantinople in the mid-14th century, just as why we should remember today and glorify this great saint. Actually, the disputes were about the very core of spiritual and religious life at a time when the ages-long experience of Athonite monks was challenged, who in their prayer with incessant mention of the name of God rose up to such high stages of the

contemplation of God as to see the divine light with their inner eyes. Some theologians decided to challenge this experience and to state that the monks, while praying, saw ordinary material light. And St. Gregory Palamas, who was not an academic theologian but a theologian of spiritual experience, described this experience in his writings and gave it a theological meaning.

He said that ascetics saw, on high stages of their contemplation in prayer, a special action of God in which the Lord Himself is present. And developing this teaching, he said that in God there is the essence that no one can comprehend and there are actions through which reveals Himself to humanity.

Today some ask: What such a teaching for? Does it not thus bring in a certain division in God? However, one can cite something similar from our human life. How do we recognize each other? – Through our actions, through the way in which each of us manifests himself to others. Nobody can say what the essence of a person is because even we ourselves do not know our own inner essence since it is known only to the Lord Himself Who has created us after in His image and after His likeness. And this image of His and His likeness, however much they may be darkened by sin, is discerned by God in the depth of our human essence; whereas it is beyond us to know each other to such a depth; we only know one another by the way in which we exhibit ourselves. And each person is revealed to us through his actions.

We can say the same about God. We do not know His essence as God is inscrutable, as all the holy fathers told us, but the Lord has revealed Himself ‘very often and in many ways’ throughout the human history, in everyone’s life and to each of us. Through His divine actions we learn that His is benevolent, merciful and all-patient. All that we can say about God enumerating His qualities we know from His actions towards each of us.

But there is a special way of the knowledge of God. It is through prayer, through standing before God at the Divine Liturgy, through partaking in the Holy Mysteries of Christ and participation in other church sacraments in which the Lord in a special way reveals Himself to each of us, to some through a profound and heartfelt feeling, to others through tears of adoration, to still others through contemplation of the divine light, and to others through His other actions and manifestations directed to each of us and touching our mind, heart and out spiritual vision. It is this experience of communion with God that is reflected in the works of great theologians of the Church.

These theologians, such as St. Gregory the Theologian and St. Gregory Palamas, did not write their works on the basis of books written by other authors. They did theology proceeding from their own spiritual experience while collating it with the millennium-old church tradition and Holy

Scriptures, which allowed them to determine flawlessly where they dealt with a heresy or God's true revelation, or a dangerous error of the human mind. It is in this way, through spiritual experience, through their experience of prayer, that theologians created the spiritual richness that we enjoy today when we open their books and read them in our cells or when we hear admonitions of these holy fathers during the liturgy.

Abba Evagrius in the same 4th century when Gregory the Theologian lived said that a true theologian is the one who prays genuinely; if you pray genuinely you will be a theologian. The holy Church calls us to prayer, to standing before God, to the opening of our souls to the Lord through repentance, and then He will open our spiritual eyes for contemplating God and doing theology.

In our time just as in the past, various heresies and false teachings arise against the Church. They are generated both within and without the Church. Today there are those who write about Jesus Christ seeking to prove that He was an ordinary man or some revolutionary who wished to overthrow the Roman yoke. And many other wicked thoughts and wicked tricks are let forth from their mouths against the Lord Jesus Christ, against His Most Holy Mother, against the veneration of saints and icons and against all that is the core of our Church. Therefore, in our time too, there is a need for theologians and theology should be done as holy fathers did it. But it should be done not from the wind in one's own head, not from human wisdom but by drawing one's resources and knowledge from one's spiritual experience, from prayer, from standing before the Lord, from participation in the church sacraments while comparing all that we can say about God, His Most Holy Mother and the holy Church with what holy fathers said, because our faith is not only apostolic and Orthodox but also paternal. We glorify holy fathers precisely because they laid the foundation of the faith by which we live and breathe today.

Dear brothers, I greet you all on the occasion of the commemoration day of this great saint.

I would like today to address a special greeting to Archimandrite Yevlogiy, the abbot of his holy monastery. It is for the first time that I celebrate together with you already in the rank of father superior. I have happened to come to the St. Panteleimon monastery many times under its former father superior Archimandrite Jeremiah of eternal memory, whom the Lord gave a long and righteous life. His memory will always stay in the hearts of the monks of this monastery and many of those who came here on pilgrimage. I wish you God's help in carrying the cross that has fallen to your lot through the election by the brethren and work of the Holy Spirit. May the Lord give you strength in your work. Bear this burden entrusted to you with dignity, strictness, humbleness, giving consolation to brethren in sorrows and helping each of them to climb the stairs of spiritual ascent and leading your flock with meekness and humbleness.

I greet you all, dear fathers and brothers, on the occasion of this feast. May the Lord preserve you all!'

After the sermon, Metropolitan Hilarion said the prayer for the dead at the grave of Archimandrite Jeremiah who died on August 4, 2016.

Metropolitan Hilarion also visited the monastery's photo shop to see the progress of work for preparing a photo album devoted to the Athonite monasteries.

Before departure from the St. Panteleimon monastery, Metropolitan Hilarion had a talk with the father superior Archimandrite Yevlogiy.

On the same day, the pilgrims departed for the Simonpetra monastery to be welcomed by bell-ringing and the brethren led by the father superior Archimandrite Yelisey. They took the delegation to the cathedral church of the Nativity. In the church, its shrines – the right hand of St. Mary Magdalene, a part of the honorable head of Martyr Sergius and a part of the holy relics of St. Nectarios of Egina – were taken out for the guests to venerate.

After the evening service, the pilgrims proceeded to the refectory. During the statuary common meal, Father Yelisey greeted Metropolitan Hilarion, noting how much His Eminence loves the Holy Mountain; he comes to it not only as representative of the Moscow Patriarchate but also a pilgrim.

'You all are aware of the theological education and theological as well as ecclesiastical experience of His Eminence Hilarion, and his love of holy fathers. For this reason I asked him to say a few words about the spiritual struggle we all are engaged in on the threshold of Holy Pascha'.

Speaking in response, Metropolitan Hilarion said:

'Very Reverend Father, dear Father Superior,

Dear Fathers and Brothers:

I would like to say a few words about the most important thing in our Christian life. If an ordinary person is asked what the most important thing in Christianity is, each will give a different answer. Some will say: The most important thing is the Church and its sacraments, others will answer: The most important thing is the moral teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ.

When I am asked about the most important thing in Christianity, I always give the same answer: What the most important is Christ. Christ is the core of our faith. Throughout our life we carefully listen to His voice, look into His image and by our spiritual sight we see in Him God and Man, as holy fathers and the holy Church have taught us.

The holy old man Simeon, when he took Infant Jesus, said: 'This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be spoken against' (Lk. 2:34). To this day Christ is an object of argument for very many people. Each year, ever new and new books about Jesus Christ keep coming out. Some authors write that there was no such Man at all; He was invented.

Others say there was such a Man; He wrote sayings which His disciples read and many decades later the followers of Jesus invented various legends about Him.

You and I know that the Lord Jesus Christ lived on this earth and that His disciples left us four Gospels as living testimonies to what the apostles saw with their own eyes and heard with their own ears. For us, these four Gospels are sources through which we come to know the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is not accidental that the Church has left the four Gospels as they were written originally. Indeed, there were attempts to make a single one out of the four Gospels but the Church rejected these attempts, for the four Gospels are the four testaments about one and the same thing. In two or three Evangelists we read the same story with each of them given a different account of particular events. But each Gospel opens for us the same image of Jesus Christ; not the four different images but one.

In order to understand the meaning of the Gospel, it is necessary to read it in a special way. The holy Gospel can be compared to a safe locked with two keys; to open this safe and take out the treasure it is necessary to use two keys, as one is not enough.

The first key is faith and belief that the Lord Jesus Christ was a real man, the same as you and I. Just as we He felt tired, needed rest and food, was angry and glad and wondered – we read about all this in the Gospel.

The Gospel also tells us how, for instance, during a strong storm the Savior felt asleep in the stern so soundly that neither the noise of the wind not the roar of waves could wake him up. Some interpreters of old said that He fell asleep in order to teach faith to His disciples. Perhaps,

it was providential but Christ fell asleep not to teach somebody something but because He was tired. For a whole day He received people, talked to them, healed the sick and therefore He humanely was very tired and slept so soundly that even a storm could not wake Him up. This and many other stories in the Gospel show that Christ was a living, real Man. And it means that all the suffering described in the Gospels were absolutely real, such as any man would endure in a similar situation.

But what the human history of Christ means for us? Was He the only one of all the people Who was crucified on a cross? Was He the only one Who was sentenced unjustly? When Spartacus's rebellion was suppressed, 6 thousand people were crucified on crosses along the Appian Way. Why then none of these crosses produced the same effect as did the Cross of the Lord Jesus Christ? – Because Jesus Christ was not only Man but also God. And it is the second key necessary to open the treasury of the Gospel. That is why all that He says and all that happened to Him is absolutely important for us.

The Son of God not always uttered things original – sometimes He simply repeated what the Old Testament says and sometimes gave His own interpretation to Old Testament texts. And all this would have an importance it has for us if it were not the words of God addressed directly to us. People often ask questions about God; many things in Him are not understandable for them. Many pilgrims, for instance, who come to Mouth Athos to ask spiritual fathers why God does this and not otherwise, why there is so much injustice in the world, why there is evil, why people have to suffer.

There is simply no theological answer to all these questions, but God has given a single answer to all human questions. This answer is the Lord Jesus Christ. To the question why people suffer we can answer that the Lord Himself took upon Himself people's suffering. To the question why there is evil in the world, we say that the Lord met this evil face to face and in His human life conquered it when rejected the devil's temptations. And when people ask: Why we should die, why the human being cannot be immortal? – We remind them the God Himself accepted death but did it to open up for us a way to immortality. The Lord Jesus Christ is God's answer to all human questions. And for us, monks, Christ is a source of continued daily inspiration.

That is why holy fathers said that we should read the Gospel every day. It would seem what it has to be read every day for if we already know all these Gospel's stories by heart? – Because every time we open the Gospel, we come to stand face to face before the Lord Jesus Christ Himself and every time, through the reading of the same passage the Saviour may open something new for us. That is why the Gospel is never tiresome for those who read it and that is why it never becomes obsolete. And for it to always open something new for us, we should read

holy fathers' scriptural interpretations and, most importantly, to always live in Christ.

After all, all our monastic life, its whole way and structure shaped through centuries is to make us encounter Christ in our own spiritual experience. We meet Him through the Prayer of Jesus, when we utter His holy name continually and many times over. We meet Christ in the divine services of our Church, when, through a series of feasts during a year, His life passes before us. We meet Him in a special way and unite with Him in a special way when we take in the Body and Blood of Christ. Through all this we unite with Christ spiritually and bodily.

I would like to wish that our monastic life may be a continued and daily revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ, that every day, opening Christ for ourselves, we may open Him to other people as well.

I wish you all the good Forty Days and wish that you may celebrate the feast of the Bright Resurrection of Christ in joy'.

After the common meal, Father Makary introduced the guests to the monastery's rich library collected in which, in particular, are over five thousand books in Church Slavonic and Russian.

In the morning of March 13, Metropolitan Hilarion, Bishop Antoniy and their party attended the midnight office and martins at the church of the Nativity in Simonpetra. Before the guests' departure, Archimandrite Yelisey thanked the pilgrims for coming and asked them to convey to Patriarch Kirill his expressions of respect and solicitation of primatial prayers and blessing.

During his trip, Metropolitan Hilarion was accompanied by Father Dimitry Ageyev of the church of Our Lady the Joy to All the Afflicted in Moscow, Hierodeacon Gregory (Sokolov) of the DECR secretariat for inter-Orthodox relations and a group of Orthodox lay people.

DECR Communication Service

Source: https://mospat.ru/en/news/48645/