Metropolitan Hilarion: I owe everything in my life to the Church

On the threshold of his 50th birthday, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations, gave an interview to the Orthodox Christianity and the World website, in which he told how he came to believe in God, as well as about his approach to life and death, his new book and gifts as a writer.

- Vladyka, although it is difficult to believe, you will soon turn fifty. When you decided to be tonsured a monk, did you make this decision picturing yourself as a twenty, thirty, forty or fifty year old (here I am referring to Patriarch Kirill and Fr. Yevgeny Ambartsumova)? Were your expectations justified?

- When I was tonsured a monk I was twenty years old and of course I didn't think of myself at the age of thirty or fifty. I lived for that moment. But I never had any doubt that I wanted to devote my life to the Church and nothing else. And over the past thirty years I have never once had cause to regret my decision. There has never be a single day or minute when I have regretted it.

I owe everything in my life to the Church. Some people have asked me: "Why did you get involved in the Church? You could have studied art, conduct an orchestra, compose music." For me ministry in the Church has always been the most important thing, everything else has built around this foundation. And for me the most important thing has always been to serve Christ.

Over all these years I have preached Christ and again and again I have discovered him for myself. I preach Christ through books, through music, through TV programmes and films. But all of this activity has not been motivated by my wanting to say or prove something to someone. First of all, when I write or speak, I discover something for myself, I let it go through me, and then I pass it on to people. Life in Christ, life in the Church is very interesting, very full, has much content, and I would like to share this life with those people who for whatever reason are outside of the Church, for whom faith is not the basic motivating factor of their lives. I would like to explain what faith gives, what Christ gives.

- In one interview you mentioned that the subject of death had intrigued you from a very early age. How did this topic first arise and how did your perception of it change?

You may be surprised, but the subject of death first arose when I was in kindergarten. I was five or six years old and I suddenly became aware that we will all one day die: that I will die, that all the children

around me will die. I began to think about this and ask myself and adults questions. I don't recall now what these questions were, nor the answers I received. I remember only that the thought of death had pierced me through and did not leave me for a fairly long time.

When I was an adolescent I also thought much about death. My favourite poet was Federico Garcia Lorca - I discovered him at a very early age. I know of no other poet who has thought and written so much about death. To a certain degree through his poetry he foretold and experienced his own death.

When I was leaving school I composed *Four Verse of Garcia Lorca* for my final exam. It was a vocal cycle on his verse for tenor and piano. Many years later I orchestrated it and renamed it *Songs of Death*. All four poems that I had chosen for this cycle were on death.

- Why were you so interested in this subject?

- Probably because on the answer to the question why we die depends the answer to the question of why we live.

- Did anything change when you began an active Church life?

- It so transpired that the beginning of my active Church life coincided with a number of deaths which troubled me greatly.

The first was the death of my violin teacher Vladimir Nikolaevich Litvinov. I was probably twelve at the time. I was very fond of him, he was a great authority for me. He was an extraordinarily cultured man, reserved, refined, knew his subject very well, held his students in great esteem, everyone adored him. He was still quite young - about forty, no more.

One day I came to school and I was told that Mr. Litvinov had died. At first I thought that somebody was playing a joke on me. But then I saw his picture in a black frame. He was one of the youngest teachers. It transpired that he had died during one of the examinations when his student was playing. He suddenly had a pain in his heart, the ambulance was called, and instead of going to Frunze Street it went to Timur Frunze Street. When the ambulance finally arrived he was already dead. I attended his funeral, it was the first death in my life.

Sometime later my grandmother died, then her sister, my great aunt, then my father died. All this happened in rapid succession, and of course the problem of death often arose not as a theoretical question but as something that had happened to people close to me. And I understood that only faith can give an answer to this question.

- Do you now have an inner understanding of what death is? For example, I can understood all of this on an intellectual level, but I cannot at all inwardly accept and understand how our loved ones leave us forever...

- The human person consists not only of his intellect, but also of his heart and body. We react to such events with all our being. So, even if we understand with our mind why this happens, even if faith strengthens us to cope with these events, nonetheless all of our human essence rebels against death. This is quite natural, for God did not create us for death: he create us to be immortal.

It would seem that we ought to be prepared for death, every evening we pray before going to sleep: "Will this bed be my tomb?" And we see the whole world in the light of this event of death, which may take us at any moment. Nevertheless, death always comes unexpectedly, and we inwardly protest against it. Each person seeks his own answer, and it cannot be exhausted by logically constructed arguments from a textbook on dogmatic theology.

One of the works which created a strong impression on me in childhood and adolescence was Shostakovich's 14th symphony. To a significant degree it was under the influence of this work that I wrote my *Songs of Death*. I listened to it many times and thought much on why Shostakovich wrote this work in his declining years. He himself called a it a 'protest against death'. But this protest in his treatment did not allow for any escape into another dimension. We can protest against death, but it will still come. This means that it is important not simply to protest against it, but also to grasp its meaning, understand why it comes and what awaits us in this connection. And the answer to this is given by faith, and not simply faith in God, but Christian faith.

We believe in God who was crucified and died on the Cross. This is not simply a God who looks down upon us from somewhere in the heavenly heights, observes us and punishes us for our sins, encourages us to be virtuous, is compassionate towards us when we suffer. It is a God who came to us, who became one of us, who abides among us through the sacrament of communion and who is alongside us - both when we suffer and when we die. We believe in God who has saved us through his suffering, Cross and Resurrection.

People often ask: why did God save man in this manner? Could he not have chosen a less painful method? Why was it necessary for God to endure the Cross? This is my answer: there is a difference between the person who sees someone drowning overboard a ship, throws him a life ring and looks on sympathetically as he struggles free of the water, and the person who for the salvation of another, at the risk of his one life, plunges into the stormy waters of the sea and surrenders his life so that another could live. God resolved to save us precisely in this way. He plunged into the stormy sea of our lives and gave

his own life so that we may be saved from death.

- This is a powerful image that I have never encountered before and truly is understandable.

- I use this image in my catechism that I have just completed. There I tried to describe the basics of Orthodox faith in simple language, using images that contemporary people can understand.

- In what way is your catechism different from the one the Synodal Biblical-Theological Commission is working upon under your direction? Why was another catechism needed?

- In the Synodal Biblical-Theological Commission for many years we wrote a large catechism. The idea was to write a fundamental work which would contain a detailed exposition of the Orthodox faith. I was entrusted with this task when I was not chairman of the commission but when it was headed by Metropolitan Philaret of Minsk. A working group was set up, we began to discuss at first the content of the catechism, then we confirmed its outline and then we invited a collective of authors.

Unfortunately, some authors wrote in such a manner that we were unable to use the fruits of their labours. Certain sections we had to commission a second or third time. Eventually, after a number of years of intense work we had a text which we discussed at plenary sessions, and we invited the members of the theological commission to express their opinion on it. Finally, we presented the text to the Church hierarchy. Now the text is being reviewed and we expect to receive these reviews.

A few days ago I received a letter from one esteemed hierarch who appended a review of the text of our catechism compiled in his diocese. The review contained much praise, but it also said that the catechism is too long, that it contains too many details which people don't need, that the catechism should be short.

When we came up with the concept of the catechism, the idea was to write a large book where the dogmas of the Orthodox Church, worship and morality would be described in detail. But now, when we have written this large book using large works by a collective of authors, we are now informed that we need a small book - a book that we can give to a person who wants to be baptized so that in the space of three days he could read all that he needs to know.

This review, I have to be honest, annoyed me. So much so that I sat at the computer and wrote my own catechism - the one that we could give to the person before he gets baptized. I wrote it so that it could be read in three days. I also wrote it within three days in a single burst of inspiration. Then, it's true, much of it had to be rewritten, made clearer and improved, but the original text was written very quickly. In this catechism I tried as much as possible in an accessible and simple manner to set forth the basics

of the Orthodox faith, describe the teaching on the Church and her worship, speak about the foundations of Christian morality.

- You write short dogmatic texts very well - we often use your books for translations into English.

- The most important thing was not to write too much. I had to limit myself all the time because of course I could have said more on each topic, but I imagined myself in the place of the person who has come to be baptized: what can we give this person so that he knows about the Orthodox faith? As a result there appeared a catechism for those who are preparing themselves for baptism, for those who were once baptized but have no church life and for those who want to know more about their own faith.

Incidentally, I wrote it thanks to the fact that we did not go to the Pan-Orthodox Council. I had planned to spend two week on Crete, but as we decided not to travel there, then a whole two weeks became unexpectedly free. I spend the time on the catechism: I wrote it in three days and edited in a week.

- Does that mean that in the near future there will be two catechisms in the Church: a detailed large one and a volume for beginners?

- These two books have a different status. One is a collective catechism which I hope we will still bring to its proper conclusion and obtain a conciliar blessing for this text. And that which I have just written is my own catechism. And I hope that it will be used, including in those instances when someone comes to be baptized and says: "Give me as book so that within three to four days I could read it and say that I am ready". It was for this purpose that this book was written.

- Your book on Christ has just been published. It's called *The Beginning of the Gospel*. When I opened it, I was speechless - this is indeed a truly necessary, important and well produced book. I have long lost interest in looking at new books, but I began to read the first chapter and realized that I could not put it down and that I should order a hundred copies straight away to be given as presents. Thank you enormously, this is a remarkable new thing, for everyone now speaks and writes about anything apart from Christ. I hope it will become a bestseller.

There are very many books written today about everything, and we do not know how to write about Christ, how to speak to people about Christ in our lives. We know how to read a prayer, what to say at confession, but Christ lacks in our everyday Christian life.

- This book has been many years in the making. In a sense it is a summary, at least, of a quarter of a

century of my development, since I began giving lectures on the New Testament in the newly created St. Tikhon's Institute. This was in the 1992-93 academic year. It was then that I encountered first not only the Gospel (which I had read since childhood) but also specialized literature on the New Testament. There was little literature then, access to it was limited. And my theological studies then centred around patristics, that it, the teaching of the Fathers. I studied patristics in Oxford and wrote my dissertation on Symeon the New Theologian there. Then on a wave of surplus inspiration I wrote books on Gregory the Theologian and Isaac the Syrian. And then this mass of patristic ideas and thoughts became a part of my book *Orthodox Christianity*.

The book *Orthodox Christianity* begins with Christ but I immediately move on to other topics. This was because I was not yet ready to write about Christ.

At the same time, the subject of Christ has occupied me all my life, at least since I was ten years old. Of course, I read the Gospel, meditated on Christ, his life, his teaching. But at a certain moment - this was about two and a half years ago - I realized that I needed to be seriously acquainted with contemporary specialized literature on the New Testament. This was because the Patriarch had blessed me to head the working group for the preparation of textbooks for the theological schools. There arose an acute need for a book on the New Testament and the four Gospels. I realized that for various reasons I would have to write this book myself. And in order to write I had to refresh my knowledge in the sphere of scholarly literature on the New Testament.

My way of mastering literary material is to abstract it. Unless I begin writing I cannot concentrate on reading like in the well known joke about the man who joins a literary institute and is asked: “Have you read Dostoevsky, Pushkin, Tolstoy?” and he replies: “I’m not a reader, but a writer.”

- You said that in your childhood you would read five to six hundred pages a day...

- Yes, I read a lot in childhood, but at a certain point I began to read less, I read only that which I had to read so that I could write. When I write, I am drawing meaning from what I have read.

At first I decided to write a textbook but then quickly understood that what was needed was a whole book. And so I began to write a book about Jesus Christ which would in time become a textbook. In the beginning I thought I would write only one book, but when I began to write I realized that this huge amount of material would not fit in one book. As a result I wrote six books. The first one has just come out, four others have already been written and will come out chronologically, the sixth has been written in its first draft. In essence, the work is complete, although the sixth book still requires some editing.

- Tell us how the book is constructed?

- I decided not to go through the chronology of the events of the Gospels, in between examining episodes from the life of Christ, miracles and parables. I decided to master the Gospel material in large thematic blocks.

The first book is called *The Beginning of the Gospel*. In it, at first, I speak of the state of contemporary New Testament scholarship and give a general introduction to all six books. Secondly, I examine the opening chapters of all four Gospels and their basic topics: the Annunciation, the Nativity of Christ, Christ's public ministry, the baptism of John, the calling of the first disciples. I give a general sketch of the conflict between Christ and the Pharisees which in the end leads to him being condemned to death.

The second book is devoted solely to the Sermon on the Mount. It is an overview of Christian morality.

The third book is devoted wholly to the miracles of Jesus Christ in all four Gospels. There I speak of what a miracle is, why some people do not believe in miracles, how faith is accorded with miracles. I examine each miracle separately.

The fourth book is called *The Parables of Jesus*. All of the parables from the synoptic Gospels are set forth and examined one after the other. I speak of the genre of the parable and I explain why it was this genre the Lord chose for his teachings.

The fifth book - *The Lamb of God* - is about the original material to be found in the Gospel of John, that is, material that is not duplicated in the synoptic Gospels.

And finally the sixth book - *Death and Resurrection* - describes the last days of the Saviour's earthly life, his sufferings on the Cross, his death, Resurrection, the appearances to the disciples after his Resurrection and Ascension into heaven.

So, that is my book epic! I had to write before I could draw meaning from the events which comprise the heart of our Christian faith, and in order that on the basis of these books I can then produce textbooks for the theological schools.

- Is it an overview or a commentary?

- At its basis lies the Gospel text. It is examined against the background of a broad panorama of commentaries, from the most ancient to contemporary. I devote great attention to criticizing modern-day approaches to the Gospel text characteristic of Western researchers.

In modern-day Western New Testament scholarship there are many different approaches to Jesus. For example, there is the approach that the Gospels are a later work, they all appeared at the end of the first century after Christ's death. There is the historical person of Christ, he was crucified on the Cross, he left a collection of teachings which was then lost. People were interested in this collection, they gathered around it and created a community of followers of Jesus.

Then they still had to understood what sort of person this was who had brought these teachings, and they began to compose various stories about him: they invented the story of his birth from the Virgin, ascribed all sorts of miracles to him, and put parables in his mouth. But in fact all of this was the product of people who bore conditionally the names of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John who headed some of the Christian communities and wrote all of this out of pastoral needs. This, in my view, absurd and blasphemous approach to the Gospel now almost dominates Western New Testament scholarship.

There are books on the 'theology of Matthew' where there is not a single word on the fact that it is Christ who stands behind this theology. According to these theologians, Christ is a type of literary hero created by Matthew for the pastoral needs of his community. Moreover, they write, there were apocryphal Gospels, and only later did the Church sift out that which she did not like, while in fact there was a great deal of other material.

In a word, there has been created around the person and teaching of Christ a multitude of scholarly myths, and instead of studying his life and teaching according to the Gospel, they study these myths invented by scholars.

I prove in my book that which for us Orthodox Christians is obvious, but not so obvious to contemporary specialists in the New Testament, which is that the only true source of information on Christ are the Gospels, there is no other reliable source. The Gospels are the testimony of eye witnesses. If you want to know how something happened, you have to trust eye witnesses. As His Holiness the Patriarch writes in *The Word of a Pastor*: how do we obtain a picture of a road accident? We have to question the witnesses. One stood here, another there, yet another somewhere else. Each of them saw something from his own perspective, each has his own story to tell, but from all of the testimonies taken together a picture emerges.

We read the Gospels and see that the evangelists agree on many things. But in some points they differ, and this is natural, for each of them saw things from his own perspective. At the same time, the image of Christ is not split in two, it is not divided into four different images. All four Gospels speak of one and the same person. In my book I write that the Gospels are like a safe with valuables with two locks that require two keys. In order to understand the Gospel narrative and its meaning, we have to use both keys. One key is belief that Christ was a real earthly person with all the characteristics of an earthly

person, like us in every way apart from sin. And the other key is belief in the fact that he is God. If one of these keys is absent, you will never discover this Person to whom the four Gospels are dedicated.

- How are your books scheduled to come out?

- The first has just come out. The others will be published when they are ready. As I have already written them, their future fate depends on the publishers.

The subject is too important and too broad. It stopped me for many years from getting down to a book on Jesus Christ. I skirted around it, studied the Fathers, wrote about the Church, examined various theological issues. But begin work on the person of Christ I could not.

- Were you afraid?

- I could not find my own approach, my own key. Of course, I studied what the Fathers wrote on Jesus Christ, this is reflected in my books. For example, in my book *Orthodox Christianity* there is a whole section on Christology. But if we look at what the Fathers wrote on redemption in the third and fourth centuries, then the basic question was: to whom was the ransom paid? The term 'redemption' was understood in its literal meaning of ransom. And they argued over whom this ransom was paid to. Some said that the ransom was paid to the devil. Others justifiably objected by asking who is the devil that such a high price be paid to him? Why should God settle up with the devil at the price of the life of his own Son? No, they said, the sacrifice was offered to God the Father.

In the Middle Ages in the Latin West there was developed the teaching on the Saviour's sacrifice on the Cross as a means as expiation of the wrath of God. The meaning of this teaching is the following: God the Father was so enraged at humanity, and humanity through its sins was so much in his debt that they had no other means of settling with him than through the death of his own Son. This death supposedly expiated both the wrath of God the Father and his justice.

This Western interpretation I find unacceptable. The apostle Paul says: "Great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh." I believe that the Fathers of the Eastern Church and Western writers in their time sought an answer to the question of what this mystery was and then created their own theories. It had to be explained to people using examples that people could understand.

Gregory of Nyssa, for example, said that God deceived the devil. He descended into Hades in his human flesh, where the devil reigned. The devil swallowed him, thinking that it was a human being, but beneath the human flesh of Christ there was concealed his divinity and, like a fish which has swallowed the hook along with the bait, the devil likewise swallowed God along with the person, and this Godhead

destroyed the power of Hades from within. It is a beautiful image, clever, but to explain to today's person the redemption using this image is impossible. We should find another language, different images.

- How do you answer this question?

- I think the most we can about God is that he wanted to save us in precisely this manner and no other. He wanted to become one of us. He wanted not simply to save us from a great height by sending us signals, extending a helping hand, but entered into the very heart of human life in order to be always with us. When we suffer, we know that he suffers with us. When we die, we know that he is alongside us. This gives us the strength to live, grants to us belief in the resurrection.

- Vladyka, you work with a great amount of literature in various languages. How many foreign languages do you know?

- Several languages to varying degrees. I speak and write fluently in English. I would even think in this language when I studied in England. I speak and read in French when the necessity arise, but not so fluently. I also speak Greek, but not so confidently (I don't have enough practice), although I can read fluently in it. And then in descending order of importance I read but don't speak Italian, Spanish and German. Of the ancient languages I studied Ancient Greek, Syrian and Hebrew.

- How did you learn foreign languages?

- I studied foreign languages using the Gospel. I always began with the Gospel of John. It is the most convenient Gospel for learning words, they are repeated constantly: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, the same was in the beginning with God." Experts say that the vocabulary of the Gospel of John is half of that of the other Gospels, although in volume it is no less than the others. This lexical laconicism is connected to the fact that many of the words are repeated.

Why is it convenient to learn language from the Gospels? Because when you read a familiar text which you know practically off by heart, you don't have to look up words in the dictionary, you recognize the words. That's how I learnt Greek. At first I read the Gospel of John, then I read the three other Gospels, then I began to read the Epistles of the apostles, then I began to read the Church Fathers in Greek. Moreover, when I studied Greek, I listened to a tape recording of the Liturgy in Greek. I studied it in the pronunciation which is used by Greeks today.

I studied Syrian in a different way. This was in Oxford, I had an excellent professor, the best specialist in Syrian literature in the world Sebastian Brock. But he said to me right away: I have no intention of teaching you the language, I'm interested in reading texts. So I began to read the texts of Isaac the

Syrian with him, and along the way I read the Gospels in Syrian and used Robinson's textbook to master the basics of grammar and syntax.

The most important thing in languages is, of course, practice. No textbook can be a substitute for practical work with a text.

- What do you think - do priests need to know foreign languages today?

- I don't have a straightforward answer. Some may not need foreign languages. But a foreign language is useful not only for purely utilitarian purposes in order to read or listen to something or have the chance to say something to someone. It's beneficial in the first instance because it opens up a whole new world. Each language reflects the thinking of a whole nation, each language has its own literature and poetry. I would say that for general development a foreign language does no harm whatsoever. Which is different from saying that some people may have no aptitude for or interest in languages.

Foreign languages are not at all obligatory for our salvation, and they should not be obligatory for pastoral ministry. Although I do believe a priest who reads the Gospel should at least have some basic Greek. After all, it was not for nothing that Greek and Latin were taught in pre-Revolutionary seminaries, even if it was to understand the meaning of individual words and expressions of what Christ says in then parables so that they could turn to the Greek original and check it.

- How do you organize your day?

- The way I organize my day is determined by my duties. I occupy several positions with the blessing of Church's hierarchy. I am the chairman of the Department for External Church Relations and as such a permanent member of the Holy Synod. I am the rector of the Ss. Cyril and Methodius Theological Institute for Post-Graduate Studies and rector of a church. I also head many various commissions and working groups for various projects.

Six days a year there is a session of the Holy Synod, eight days a year sessions of the Higher Church Council. Sunday is a day of worship. Each church feast day is also a day of worship. Naturally, before each session of the Synod we have at least a number of days preparing for it. We prepare documents, work out the agenda. There are days when I am present in the Department of External Church Relations and the Institute for Post-Graduate Studies. There are many meetings with Orthodox bishops, non-Orthodox, ambassadors of various countries. An important part of my activities is travel. In the first five years of my being chairman of the Department for External Church Relations I had more than fifty trips abroad a year. Sometimes I flew into Moscow only to change planes!

- Do you have a fear of flying?

- No. But after five years I have begun to travel less. In five years I have visited everyone whom I need to visit, and now I can maintain contact with many of them through telephone calls and emails, that is, I don't have to travel specially in order to talk to someone.

Moreover, if before I accepted all invitations to attend various conferences, there came the moment when I myself felt and His Holiness said: "You should not travel so much. You should go only to the most important events where nobody apart from you can take part." So the number of trips has fallen - without detriment to our work, I believe.

My schedule in basically made up of days spent at sessions of the Synod and the Higher Church Council, days spent at the Department and the Post-Graduate Institute, Church feast days and trips. It can be predicted a year in advance.

There are gaps in this schedule which I need so that I can do something that I would conditionally call creative. For example, write a book.

- Which days do you do this on?

- First of all, on the civil holidays. To rephrase the well known song, one may say: I do not know any country that has so many days off. Apart from vacation, the country relaxes for ten days in January, a number of days in February, March, May, June and November. These days off I use in order to write. For example, the New Year period from the end of December to the Nativity of Christ is a time when I write. I also write on Saturdays. I don't have any days off in the traditional meaning of the word. If I have no duties on a particular day, then I write on this day.

- Do you write quickly?

- Usually I write a lot and quickly. I think over something for a long time, but when I sit down to write, my average is five thousand words a day. Sometimes I don't fulfill this quota, and sometimes I go over it.

- That's more than a writer's quota of five thousand words!

- It is. With this intensive rhythm it is possible to write a sufficiently large text in a quite short space of time. It takes me about twenty such days to write a book of about one hundred thousand words.

- Usually books are measured according to printed symbols and writers' quotas of words...

- I calculate in words ever since I was at Oxford. When I studied at Oxford, I was limited to one hundred thousand words for my doctoral dissertation. I exceeded this limit and found myself in a difficult situation: I was asked to shorten my text. I shortened it as best I could, but nonetheless the amount of excess words came to about twenty thousand after my dissertation had been bound (and binding then was extremely expensive). My professor - bishop Kallistos - had to go specially to the study committee and demonstrate that my topic absolutely needed these extra twenty thousand words. Since then I have tried, first of all, to write laconically, and, secondly, I calculate my work by number of words and not symbols.

- Do you ever get permanently distracted? Is the internet or your email on your computer, for example, switched off?

- No.

- I recall that you answer email in record time?

- When I sit at the computer and I get a message, then if it's short and to the point, I try to reply immediately.

- Do you get many letters?

- No less than thirty a day.

- But there should be breaks of some kind?

- Yes. There are breaks for something to eat. But ever since I served in the army I have always been in the habit (a habit bad for one's health) of eating quickly. Breakfast takes ten minutes of my time, dinner fifteen minutes, supper ten to fifteen minutes. All the time when I am not eating, sleeping or praying I am working.

- Vladyka, tell us what you think of contemporary divine worship. What are the problems of understanding liturgical prayer?

- Orthodox worship is a synthesis of arts. This synthesis is made up of the Church's architecture, the icons and frescoes on the walls, the music which can be heard at the services, reading and singing, prose and poetry which resounds in church, and choreography, the entrances and exits, processes and prostrations. We participate in Orthodox worship using all of our senses. For example, through sight and

hearing and smell as well - we can smell the fragrance of the incense - and we venerate the icons, receive communion through taste, through taste we take holy water and prosphoras.

It is in this manner through the five senses we perceive worship. Worship ought to envelop the whole person. A person cannot be in another place with one part of his being while the rest of him attends worship - he must immerse himself fully into the service. And our worship is so constructed that during the time when we are immersed in this prayer we do not switch off from it.

If you have been in Catholic or Protestant churches, you will have seen that worship there as a rule consists of various bits and pieces: first people sing a psalm then sit, listen to a reading, then stand again. Worship in the Orthodox Church is uninterrupted. This of course helps us to immerse ourselves in the prayerful atmosphere. Our worship is a school of theology and contemplation, it is replete with theological ideas. It is completely impossible to understand worship without knowing, for example, the dogmas of the Church. This is why Orthodox worship for many people appears to be incomprehensible - not because it is in Church Slavonic, but because it appeals to the consciousness of completely different people.

Let us suppose that people come to listen to the Great Canon in the first week of Great Lent. The canon may be read in Church Slavonic or it may be read in Russian, but the effect will remain the same, because the canon was written for monks who knew the Bible practically off by heart. When a name was mentioned in this canon, then in the heads of the monks there immediately arose an association with a Biblical story which here was interpreted allegorically in relation to the soul of the Christian. But today these associations don't arise with the majority of those who listen to the canon, and many of the names that are mentioned in the Great Canon we don't even remember.

Accordingly, people come for the Great Canon, they listen to what the priest is reading, but basically they are responding to the refrain of "Have mercy upon me, God, have mercy me." And each stands with his own prayer, his own repentance, which in itself is of course good and important, but it is not quite what the Great Canon was written for. Therefore, in order to understand worship, in order to love it, it is necessary and of course good to know Church dogma and know the Bible.

- You often have contact with non-Church people. What is most important of all for a priest when talking to people far removed from the Church?

- I think that the main thing is what we can tell people about God, about Christ, so that their eyes shine, so that their hearts are set aflame. And in order for this to happen, our eyes too should sparkle, we should live by that which we speak of, we must be aflame with this all the time, we ought to kindle within ourselves interest in the Gospels, the sacraments of the Church, the dogmas of the Church. And, of

course, we must be able to speak to people on complex things in a language they can understand.

Source: https://mospat.ru/en/news/49323/