



Metropolitan Hilarion: Sacrificial love makes human existence meaningful

Metropolitan Hilarion: Good day, dear brothers and sisters! You are watching «The Church and The World».

During these days we are all celebrating one of the most luminous and beloved feasts – the Nativity of Christ. Every human knows: this feast is dedicated to the Nativity and coming to the World of Jesus Christ. In human minds, Christmas is closely related to the notions of goodness, light, miracle and feast, of course.

After having passed through a whole century of unbelief, we have almost lost this one as well as many other traditions of our Christian people. The guest of today's show has said: «It is my conviction that all horrible things that our country and Russian people experienced in 20th century are totally due to unbelief». Today I am glad to welcome in our studio a filmmaker, script writer, producer and thinker – Nikita Sergeyevich Mikhalkov.

Good afternoon, Nikita Sergeyevich!

Nikita Mikhalkov: Good afternoon, Your Eminence!

Your Eminence, while listening to your introductory remarks, I thought that we could have really lost not only the feast of Nativity, but the very feast of life in Christ, because for so many years all that determines the identity of Russian people was being trampled down, exterminated, outraged, and it seemed that it was impossible to arise from all of this. Some time ago, I even had a feeling that the Orthodox Christianity was one of the youngest religions, at least in Russia, because this religion has sprouted as a bourgeon. Do you remember those broken churches? And a little birch is all of a sudden growing from a broken dome – a young and little birch, a germ. A terrible apocalyptic spectacle of ruin, and suddenly – this life, which has landed there and is growing. Similarly, as a germ through the asphalt, has arisen Russia's return to Orthodoxy.

Later it became a kind of fashion, but what is the most important is that we have not lost that feeling of feast of faith.

Metropolitan Hilarion: I believe that for our people, the return to the faith has become the biggest miracle of the 20th century. Because, indeed, a lot has been done to trample down, to hide, to

exterminate the faith. How much effort has been made, beginning from the physical extermination of the clergy, the destruction of churches that you have mentioned, down to a powerful ideological struggle led against the Church during 70 years. And as soon as people had an opportunity to breathe freely, the first thing they recollected was the faith. We all remember the end of the 1980s, the beginning of the 1990s, when people started massively to come to churches, to be baptized. At that time, a priest could baptize 200, 300, 400 people a day. Our priests were literally dead on their feet.

No one could expect this. The feast of faith and life did really come back, because people could take a new view of their life. It was a difficult time, followed by another difficult period. What did help people to live through these times? The difficult 1990s when there was nothing to eat, when people were losing their jobs, when the ground was slipping from under their feet. And people did find a new ground to stand on – the faith, which gives a completely different dimension to life.

Nikita Mikhalkov: You know, Your Eminence, it is in fact an enormous work.

The Lord ordained that I was initiated to the Church in my childhood, by my mother. And my father, despite *what* he was, did let it be without being involved in it. When he was summoned to the Party Central Committee and asked how could this have occurred, he answered: “You see, my wife is 10 years older than me. When Lenin died, she was 14, I cannot change her. You want me to ban her from doing it? She will not understand me”. And they gave up.

But many were bred in very different conditions. I will give you an example. One quite young general, with whom I got into a conversation, told me: “When I enter a Buddhist temple, a mosque, a Catholic church, I am at ease, because I am a tourist there. It is interesting to me to have a look at different things, and I am being told about the rites. But when I come to an Orthodox church, I feel it is my own, but I don't know how things are done in it. I cannot cross myself mechanically. I do not know how to do it properly.” While listening to him, I remembered the words of one priest, whom my fellow's wife addressed: “Father, I read the Psalter every day. I do not understand a half of what is written.” He responded: “You just read, and devils do understand everything. The most important thing for you is to read. You just do your bit.”

And I say the same to my friend, the general: “Just come.” He argues: “I do not believe.” “Just come.” A year later, I happened to meet him in a church. I ask: “So, how are things?” “Everything is fine”. He came to believe. Imagine the profound change that had taken place in him. He was told that there is no God. Naturally, he was a member of the Communist Party; he used to serve in important special services. As you remember, a lot of our leaders at the time were surnamed “candle holders” - they stood in churches and held candles, but without understanding, without listening, contrary to the communist ideology, just because they had to stand like that. First he treated it as phariseism. And when he began

striving for the faith in order to understand and feel it, his soul began to open. However, for these people it is much more troublesome to understand that it is a spiritual bath cleansing every filthiness, and that everyone, be it a sovereign and a poor man, is equal before the altar – than for those who come to church since their childhood. And when such a metamorphosis happens to a person initially distant from the Church, this is very honourable. Since, I have had a great respect for this guy.

Metropolitan Hilarion: What you have said is directly related to the essence of the religious life. After all, some people suppose that to be religious is to have a certain ideology or belief, or a certain amount of knowledge. A believer, [they think,] is someone who recognizes that there is one God, and a Christian is one who believes that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and so on. And this is true, but the religious life is not limited to it. We are often asked: “Why is your divine service so archaic?” Because there are some Christian traditions, where the Divine Service is modernised and musical instruments are used...

Nikita Mikhalkov: People are seated...

Metropolitan Hilarion: Yes, but this is a particular case, because in ancient monasteries people were seated during the Divine Service and people do seat at Mount Athos nowadays. But when we are told that the texts are incomprehensible and that the music is archaic in ancient monasteries, and all these gestures and choreography that make up the liturgy - what is it all for? They say that for a modern man all this is not clear, that it is necessary to simplify, to translate to Russian.

All this reminds me the arguments of people who say that they do not understand the symphonic music of Bach, Brahms and Beethoven. It is really not clear for many nowadays – yet, not because it is bad or inaccessible in itself, but because people have ceased to cultivate a taste for the high art. What should be done to make a symphony of Brahms understandable? Arrange it for a dance orchestra? I do not think that it will benefit from it.

For many, the Divine Service becomes an opportunity to meet God not because they would hear some words, but because they came there, plunged, as you said, into the cleansing bath or regenerating font, felt something that they had not come in touch with in their life before. When Prince Vladimir's ambassadors - while choosing the faith at his instruction - came to Constantinople, there was a service in Greek language. We are sure that they did not understand anything, not a word. And yet, they came back and said: "We've never seen and could not have imagined something like that. We cannot tell what happens there, but we know that there God communicates with people." And many people feel the same when they come to church.

Nikita Mikhalkov: Once Mikhail Chekhov came to see "King Lear", performed in Hebrew. He did not understand a single word, but wept along with everyone who was sitting next to him, because it is not a

matter of words, it is a matter of pulse and energy of the birth of a word.

The liturgy is not born from words, I believe. I may be mistaken, but you will say if I am. The liturgy transforms into words the energy of faith and feeling, and not vice versa. When a person wants the words to explain him something which is impossible to explain, that means that he did not “enable” in himself this feeling, through which he can understand everything without words.

It is like music. Any art, as, once again, Mikhail Chekhov said, seeks to be like music: literature, poetry, architecture. Why? Because music, as Bergman used to say, is the abstract matter that gets into your heart avoiding the intermediary of the intellect. The faith, to my mind, should enter the heart avoiding the intermediary of the intellect. And only after that this faith results in actions of a man, who processes it depending on his educational qualification: whether he is a university graduate or has never studied. But the result of this emotional shock, emotional penetration, is interpreted and converts the energy into action.

Metropolitan Hilarion: In these Christmas days, I would like to recall that at the heart of our religious tradition is a very unique, special person, unprecedented in history – Jesus Christ. What do many come to experience when they read the Gospel for the first time? They do not understand a lot of things because the events described in the Gospels took place long time ago, two thousand years ago in some completely different culture, when people thought differently, lived at a different pace. But those who begin to read the Gospel suddenly feel that behind all the words and between the lines stands a real, a very unique and attractive person of Jesus Christ.

In the Gospel there is a story about how the chief priests and elders sent their servants to catch Jesus, because they wanted to punish Him. But the servants returned without Him. They are asked: “Why did not you bring Him here?” And they replied: “Nobody has ever spoken as this Man does” (cf. John 7:32-53).

That is the impression that people received from the Savior's words. And these listeners, who gathered around Him when He preached, asked themselves not so much about what He had in mind, but about what was actually going on there. Because while telling a parable, He was drawing a certain image. He was telling, for example, about a son, who left his father and later came back to the father's house (cf. Luke 7:32-53). And in the parable every person could hear about himself and recognise his own story.

Why do these parables after two thousand years continue to affect people as strongly as they did at that time. Because they are universal. They are projected on the life of each person, and everybody recognises their experience. And if you try to consider all this teaching from the point of view of philosophy and to derive a lecture, wondering what the Savior actually meant, what he specifically

wanted to prove - it will be difficult to answer. It is like music as well. That is what we get in touch with in the personality of Jesus Christ.

Nikita Mikhalkov: Each time the Gospel reveals to you something that you missed or misunderstood. It may seem strange, but it becomes easier and easier to understand; it becomes so clear. I have personally understood what pushed these people to kill Christ: jealousy, a terrible jealousy. So common, so simple and so ineradicable: "Why are You able to do it, while we are not?"

Yes, some could see in it a loss of their power, wealth, fame, and so on. But many said: "Get out of here, go away, go away, we lived so well without You. All was fine. Why do You arouse our feelings? Why do You excite our conscience? Our life was so good and so calm with this conscience. Get out of here".

It is an astonishing feeling [to see] a person who does not want to reach out to the one who is superior to him and tries to drag him down to his level. There are two phrases, at first glance similar to each other: "I want to be understandable" and "I want to be understood." But, nevertheless, "I want to be understandable" means to come down to the level of those who want you to be clear to them, while "I want to be understood" means to raise to your own level the one who wants to understand.

When Christ speaks He is trying to be *understood*, but they want Him to be *understandable*. And He says: "According to your faith be it unto you" (cf. Matt 9:29). "Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear and whoever has eyes to see, let him see. I will not explain any more". And they do not forgive Him this.

Metropolitan Hilarion: You put it very well: when Christ spoke to the people, He raised the interlocutor to His level, at least He tried to do so. For example, it can be seen from the conversation of Jesus with the Samaritan woman. She tells Him about earthly things: about the well, next to which they met, the mountain where they ought to worship God, and the Lord spoke to her very differently, that is to say, she lives in one reality, and He reveals to her a different one. She says: "Our fathers worshipped in this mountain; and ye say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship." And He responds to her: "Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father. But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth" (cf John 4:5-24).

Jesus creates a new religion. Why did He have such a sharp conflict with the Scribes and Pharisees? In our time, it may be surprising after all; it would seem why not to smooth out the rough edges?

Nowadays, some write that it was a sort of internal family conflict. They seemed to be arguing about an interpretation of the Law of Moses, and in fact there was a dispute about the substance of the religious

life, about *what* piety is. For the Pharisees it consisted in creating a certain number of rules to be followed strictly. And since these rules were too many and difficult to respect, a parallel system was being created, specifying in which cases the rules can be broken. Many volumes dating back to that period and containing a set of rules and exceptions have survived. And this is how the piety was seen.

Christ spoke of a completely different piety. He said one's piety should be manifested first of all in one's deeds. A person cannot love God without helping others. He said that on the Day of Judgment people will be judged according to their deeds, not by fulfillment of particular duties. It turns out that Jesus Christ brought to the world a completely new religion, an entirely new type of relationship between man and God.

We consider God not as Someone Who has imposed upon us a number of rules that we must fulfill. If we do fulfill them, we will get a reward, otherwise we will be punished. We do not live in fear of defilement, like those Pharisees who were afraid to be defiled by touching something that they considered unclean. And they thought how, on the one hand, not to break the law, and on the other, how to bypass it, so that it might be admissible. We have a completely different attitude. We have a filial attitude towards God. We treat God with trust and love. And this is a completely new paradigm of relationship between man and God, which Christ has brought to this world.

Nikita Mikhalkov: Yuz Aleshkovsky said a brilliant phrase that struck me: "Freedom is the absolute trust in God." Not faith, but precisely trust. "Into thy hands I commend my spirit" (cf. Luke 23:46).

You see how amazingly can the Savior speak adjusting his discourse to the level of a person whom he is talking to. With the Samaritan woman He spoke absolutely not in a preachy manner. He listens to her, He talks to, taking into account her level of perception of the world. With the Pharisees He sounds totally different. He denounces them.

But the most amazing thing - and I believe our Orthodox faith is unique in this - is that invisible presence of Christ is felt by any believer at any time. While committing a sin, you do not want Him to be standing next to you, but you know that He is. And his presence is *a priori* natural to you because you know (it may sound wrong) that He is one of yours.

When you say: "Lord, why do I feel so bad?," and much less often "Lord, why do I, a scoundrel, feel so good?" This reveals human ingratitude. My mother used to say, "Do not ask what for, ask why." When you do not complain, you can immediately feel the striking sense of the Lord's presence. One of the starets said, "Never demand justice from God - if He was fair, He would have punished you long ago." So when you feel bad and you exist only in the question "what for?", it is important to change your vision and to try to understand *why*, and not *what* it is sent for. This is the infinity of life - so that you may

understand and to rectify. For me, this is the most divine.

Metropolitan Hilarion: When we talk about the meaning of the Nativity of Christ, we think first of all that it is God who came to us. If earlier people had to overcome the immeasurable distance between themselves and God by their own means, now God Himself has overcome it. He has come to us, and He is not just amidst us, but he is in us. When we take the Holy Communion, we receive God in ourselves. This is a really impressive degree of intimacy between man and God.

The icon of the Nativity represents a woman with a baby, and a more familiar scene for a human life cannot be imagined. Nevertheless, we know that this woman is the Mother of God, and this baby is Incarnate God Himself. When we read about the life of Jesus Christ, when we read in the Gospels how He faced death, we see that He was doing it absolutely consciously; He did not try to evade from death...

Nikita Mikhalkov: Though His words: "Let this cup pass from me" (cf. Matt 26:39)...

Metropolitan Hilarion: Humanly...

Nikita Mikhalkov: This is the most touching.

Metropolitan Hilarion: He was afraid of death as a human being, because He was an absolutely real man. He would not have been such, if He had accepted suffering with a head held high. But He was afraid of death. He said: "My soul is exceeding sorrowful unto death" (cf. Mark 14:34). In these brief, laconic words of the Gospel we recognise a real man, the same as we are, but free from sin.

We understand that sin is not something inherent in us, humans, by nature; this is something which we can escape from. But sacrificial love and the willingness of God and His desire to be with us, among us and within us is the most striking thing in Christianity. Thanks to this, Christianity will always be relevant, modern, opening new horizons for everyone. The sacrificial love makes human existence meaningful.

I would like to greet you and all of our viewers on the occasion of the feast of the Nativity of Christ and wish you that Christ may be present in our lives through His Gospel and His Church.

DECR Communication Service

Translated by Anton Konkin