Metropolitan Hilarion: To create an environment favorable for immigrants is a common task for the Church and the state

On February 8, 2015, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk as anchorman of the Church and the World program on Russia-24 NV network hosted the head of the Federal Migration Service Directorate for Promoting Integration, Ms Tatiana A. Bazhan.

Metropolitan Hilarion: Good afternoon, dear brothers and sisters! You are tuned to the Church and the World program. Today we will talk about cooperation between the Church and the state in the work with immigrants. I have as a guest today the head of the Russia's Federal Migration Service Department for Promoting Integration, Ms Tatiana Bazhan. Good afternoon, Ms Bazhan!

Ms Bazhan: Good afternoon, Your Eminence! The problem of the work with immigrants and the problem of church-state of cooperation are very vital today. In recent years, Russia has proved fairly attractive for people from a number of countries. There is a great number of immigrants in our country. A few years ago, in 2010, the Federal Migration Service realized that it was not enough to deal only with documenting immigrants and to take only restrictive measures by prohibiting entrance to some or deporting and fining, etc., others. What is important is the humanitarian component precisely in adaptation and integration.

When considerably large groups of people who speak a different language and adhere to a different culture find themselves in our country, it is important that they should have an opportunity for merging into our spiritual, cultural and social space. To do it, titanic work is needed to be carried out. And the FMS began this work for promoting the integration a few years ago. We were aware that this work was still devoid of the necessary legislative support. For this reason, contacts with the civil society proved to be very important.

We work with various national public and religious associations. It is noteworthy that we have found the greatest support, understanding and desire to meet us halfway in the Russian Orthodox Church. In 2013, the Federal Migration Service and the Russian Orthodox Church concluded a cooperation agreement, above all, in the sphere of adaptation and integration of foreigners in the Russian Federation. Under this agreement, a joint ROC and MFS commission has been established. From the Church's side, it is headed by Archbishop Vsevolod Chaplin, head of the Synodal Department for Church-Society Relations. The commission has managed to organize the work not only on the level of general theoretical nature and contacts in Moscow but also in regions, which is very important for us.

As of today, there are 39 Russian language courses, which have been opened through the initiative and support of the Russian Orthodox Church. Many dioceses have responded and cooperated. But it is not so easy to organize the courses. Public funds are not allocated to this work. This form of training as adaption for immigrants and some educational work in this sphere has not been provided by our legislation as yet.

Religious organizations have helped us to find facilities and to provide qualified teachers. This work is very important. It is not accidental that our regional bodies have concluded as of today over seventy cooperation agreements in this sphere with local metropolias and dioceses.

Metropolitan Hilarion: I would like to commet on some topics we have touched. First of all, you began with the fact that in recent years Russia has become very attractive for people from various countries. A very large inflow of immigrants are certainly the so-called labour immigrants, people who have come in search for a living from Central Asia – Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and other former republics of the Soviet Union. They come to us for a long stay to raise money which then they send back to their families. Certainly, they need to adapt because many of them, especially the younger generation, cannot even speak in Russian.

Ms. Bazhan: Unfortunately, they cannot.

Metropolitan Hilarion: Here the Church and the state have an opportunity for cooperation, and you have cited examples of this cooperation. The Church participates in this work not, let's say, to convert Muslims to Orthodoxy. There is no such aim as proselytism. The Church and the state have a different common goal to see to it that all people in our country could live in peace and harmony. And peace and harmony are achieved only when people understand each other, when immigrants enter into the linguistic and cultural environment and comprehand the principles, norms and rules of their host people, when they understand what the sacred is and what sacredness is, and respect what people of other religion, who live next to them, hold sacred. The work to adapt immigrants in this respect is very important not only for the state but also for the Church. That is, without setting ourselves the task to convert everybody to Orthodoxy, we set ourselves the task to create a favourable and friendly background against which religious confessions can calmly develop without any threat to their faithful.

Recently, in one of my programs we talked about it with a mufti, noting specifically the problem of ignorance in religious sphere. Regrettably, this ignorance still prevails because those who come only in search for a living do not always take the trouble to understand the culture of our people, their traditions and customs, and to learn the Russian language. To help them overcome this cultural barrier, among other things, by creating a favourable environment for immigrants themselves is our common task.

Ms Bazhan: Absolutely.

Metropolitan Hilarion: We have another group of people, first of all, from the Far East. It is immigration to Russia from China. These are people who come, again, in search for a living or those who enter into a marriage, and we should help them, too, to adapt. The Supreme Church Council at its meeting often deals with the problem of adaptation of immigrants. At the Patriarch's instruction and under the aegis of this Council, we have prepared a textbook for immigrants from China. It is not a textbook on religious instruction or history of the Church. It is a textbook in which we seek to tell them, first of all, about our country, its culture built on Orthodox values and the role of the Church in our country's cultural, public and social life.

Ms Bazhan: Since January the 1st, all the foreign citizens who plan to work in our country as well as

foreigners who wish to obtain permission for sojourn or residence permit are obliged to take an exam in the Russian language, history of Russia and Russian basic legislation. Therefore, it is very important and timely that such a textbook has been prepared, especially for a specific structure and specific ethnos.

Recently, the Synodal Department for Church-State Relations led by Father Vsevolod has sponsored another textbook, more universal in nature and intended for immigrants of popular labour background, which you have mentioned (Central Asia, Transcaucasia). The first Russian language courses for immigrants, established precisely in cooperation with the Church, appeared in the Stavropol Region. The first intake of immigrants who applied to these courses were people belonging to various Christian confessions. Later however, the course attracted a fairly large group of people from Afghanistan, who confess Islam. And they took delight in attending these courses.

Metropolitan Hilarion: But nobody try to convert them to Orthodoxy.

Ms Bazhan: Of course, the courses are not a missionary action. It is really cultural instruction, and people, remaining Muslims as nobody encroaches on their inner spiritual world in this process, learn that Russia is not some strange political entity which emerged twenty years ago but a country with a great and unique culture which is over one thousand years old. Our country is a commonwealth of an enormous number of peoples who live in it.

Your Eminence, you have made a very important point: without any knowledge of the language and no opportunity for plunging into the communication space of the host society, is it possible for one to know laws and adequately and effectively defend one’s rights? Certainly, not.

Metropolitan Hilarion: We have seen the emergence of still another numerically large group of immigrants – refugees from eastern Ukraine. We certainly hope that the conditions will be created as soon as possible for them to return to their homes. But we should understand that some of them will

apparently stay.

They do not need to adapt to our culture, for they already belong to it. On the one hand, they find here a kindred cultural and spiritual space, but on the other, they need to adapt as well. As far as refugees are concerned, we seek to create conditions for them to survive and to go through the winter so that their children may not fall ill, that they may have enough food and a roof over their heads. Here, too, the Church maintains cooperation with the state, especially with regard to the frontier regions in which our dioceses are directly involved in aid to refugees. But first and foremost, the state can help materially while the Church spiritually.

In this connection, there is another important point to make. Every migration involves psychological stress. And along with our task to help people master the Russian language (if they do not know it) and familiarize themselves with our culture (if they are not familiar with it), we should also help them to overcome this stress, which develops because of the change in their living conditions, when some may find themselves in not quite a favourable or comfortable milieu. To prevent all this from generating conflict situations in which those who have come to our country may be pushed out to a path leading to crime, it is necessary that the Church and the state should undertake serious joint work. And this work is being carried out.

You have cited examples of cooperation between the Federal Migration Service and the Synodal Department for Church-State Relations. The work with immigrants, among other things, is a direct responsibility of this department. But we really should involve in it all the healthy forces of our society, just as all the healthy forces of the Church are involved in this work. The Synodal Department alone cannot do this work as it includes both spiritual and material support for millions-strong groups of people coming to Russia from various countries.

Ms Bazhan: Let me cite as an example the Synodal Department responsible for missionary concerns, which work under the guidance of Metropolitan Ioann (Popov). In Belgorod, there is an adaptation and information center for immigrants, which works, along with others, with people from Ukraine. In addition, there is the Stavropol Region. Through cooperation between our office in that region and the Metropolia

of Stavropol, the region has become a participant in the state-run program for promoting the volunteer resettlement of our compatriots who live abroad. At present, our compatriots, including Ukrainian citizens, have already filed about one thousand applications for participation in this program. The state program is a direct state mechanism not only for adaptation but also full integration, including documenting the compatriots who wish to become Russian citizens.

Metropolitan Hilarion: Thank you, Tatiana Alekseyevna, for coming to our program. In your person, I would like to thank the Federal Migration Service for the fruitful cooperation which has not just been registered in an agreement but also implemented on the everyday basis.

DECR Communication Service

Source: https://mospat.ru/en/news/50655/