Metropolitan Hilarion: The more positive news in the mass media the less aggression in society

On September 22, 2012, the Church and the World program of the Russia 24 TV channel had as its guest Alexander Arkhangelsky, an author, publicist and television anchor-man. Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, head of the Moscow Patriarchate's department for external church relations, talked with him.

***Metropolitan Hilarion**:* Good afternoon, Alexander.

Arkhangelsky: Good afternoon, Your Eminence. I would like, if I may, to torture you by asking some questions concerning something that very much disturbs and upsets me, namely, the growing aggression. It cannot be measured by any sensors or counters, but as a man of letters I feel with my nerve endings the growing irritation in society. While appearing not to be addressed to anyone specifically, it is just irritation and aggression as a momentary splatter, a first reaction to any challenge. People are against people, groups are against groups, cities are against cities. It seems to me very dangerous and alarming.

I may contradict myself in citing some examples which seem to me positive, but there are also negative examples. For instance, I read many Orthodox faithful and even clergy in the Internet. One can see in their blogs and Facebook pages continuous condemnation of all and sundry, endless indignation at everything and castigation of everything. There is little however about the love of Christ, the Church as a place where you can come to, where your hand will be held with love, where you will be understood even

if you are wrong, where the right way will be shown. Why is the Orthodox Internet so aggressive?

Metropolitan Hilarion: There are two aspects of the problem you have raised. One is the Internet and another is the state of our society generally. It seems to me that the Internet unlike, say, a TV screen, is a special space just for people to spill out their aggression. Now we are sitting in the studio and however much we may wish, we would still be ashamed to, say, wrangle or throw orange juice at each other's faces.

A. Arkhangelsky: I hope that had we corresponded in the Internet, we would still be ashamed of doing it.

Metropolitan Hilarion: Yes, but the Internet in which people can be present anonymously offers additional opportunities for spilling out aggression. I do not think you and me will really squabble in the Internet, but we would have opportunities for doing it. But now we don't have them, and we have to behave as civilized persons. It is one of the problems of the Internet that people can pour in it all the negative emotions they have accumulated. One cannot tell something to his wife or his loved ones, but he can plunge in the virtual space and spill out his dirt in it.

Another problem you have raised is the growing aggressiveness in our society. I can feel it as well. It is a problem I believe more serious because it is no longer a matter of a specific organization of a space, but an inner problem of us themselves. The question is how capable we are of listening to each other. It seems to me everybody should get accustomed to the idea that there are people around us with very diverse point of views including those who do not share our views at all and oppose them. We should learn the culture of peaceful dialogue, that is, a dialogue which does not grow into a squabble or mutual offenses, which does not allow its participants to distort each other's words and ideas.

It is my conviction that inner aggression should be healed by each on his or her personal level. We should remove aggression in the first place in ourselves, that is, begin reforming the world with our own

selves, not with those around us.

A. Arkhangelsky: I came to church at the end of the Soviet power. Clearly, it was a different time when priests were ‘beaten’ and careful, in the good sense of the word. They knew that if a young parishioner made a show of his feelings, he would simply fall in the clutches of not so nice organizations. For this reason they tried to take one softly away from the political world into the world spiritual and to lead him along this path. And today, the Church, the people of the Church, cannot help responding to the challenges of the outer world and for this reason the Church has become tougher.

I can see different priests; I can see young bishops who have been installed in dioceses in recent years. They are absolutely wonderful – you can make a movie or write a book about them if you like. Now, I came to Yakutsk with film director Mirzoev for a meeting with university people and unexpectedly Bishop Roman and Father Andrey Moroz, head of the seminary, came to it. Afterwards we got into a conversation. It was an very special talk, although it doesn’t mean we agreed on everything, but it turned out that the bishop was a human being. You know, they sometimes create an impression of flying up almost in clouds…

Metropolitan Hilarion:…Sometimes they are even said to be ‘bishops with human face’.

A. Arkhangelsky: A bishop with a human face. Why are these human faces, why is this humanity, firstly, so seldom shown to society, and secondly, why is it taken so badly, read out so poorly?

Metropolitan Hilarion: Well, first of all, it is because bishops and priests are very busy people, occupied in what belongs to their immediate sphere of responsibility. Thus, for instance, a bishop who serves in Yakutia has to be mostly in this region and to keep in contact with his flock. He may appear in the local, not central, mass media. As for the central TV channels, invited to them are certain people, normally the same ones who are not always capable of presenting the Church’s official view and to separate it from their own opinion. And, most importantly, these persons are not always capable of

conducting a peaceful dialogue with society.

I think some part of the guilt for misunderstanding existing today between the Church and some segments of our society lies with those who on behalf of the Church voice some very tough ideas in a very aggressive tone. I believe it is a great mistake to choose an aggressive tone in communication, say, with television viewers, especially if you are a priest, if you wear a robe and a cross. People expect something very different from you – first of all, a calm, even-tempered and well-considered word, but by no means an aggression.

A. Arkhangelsky: On the other hand, in a society in which people have developed a demand for all that is scandalous and unpleasant, it is a media thing, a discussible thing. It is not only our problem, but a worldwide one. More often than not, people see what they want to see. A certain priest in an expensive car gets smashed up in the center of Moscow, and everybody will know about it immediately, but we see or hear nothing about a priest in a small town or village, who not just save people but also keeps its whole infrastructure; in villages they often take the place of kolkhoz chairmen because everything around is dying out, and if it were not for the priest, who assumes this cross and bear it, the village would have perished. This kind of information is not taken in.

Metropolitan Hilarion: It is not mentioned because there is no scandal. It is not rating-giving information, so people normally learn only negative facts about the Church. They learn about the Church only when some scandal breaks out, concerning the Church in this or that way. Thus a completely false impression of the Church as a whole is created.

Yet there is a real life of the Church, her tremendous real work. Sometimes we are asked, 'Why are there so many social disasters of all kinds, why are there so many sins committed? Where is the Church?'. To this I will answer that if there were no Church, everything would be much worse. A tremendous work carried out by the Church has certainly brought its fruits, only it is difficult to show these fruits on television.

It is similar to the situation of medical doctors in hospitals. We learn from the mass media about hospitals only when, say, power has been switched off in them or somebody died because of the medical staff's negligence. At the same time, the colossal work of thousands, dozens and hundreds of thousands of doctors who treat the sick saving and prolonging their lives for scores of years is not reflected in any way in the mass media. I like very much the comparison between church and hospital, between priest and doctor, because lying in the service of both is the desire to help people, with priest healing human souls while doctors healing human bodies.

The Church is a spiritual hospital to which people come to be healed. Just as a doctor, a priest may be more experienced or less experienced. Just as a doctor can make a right diagnosis or can make a mistake, so a priest can sometimes 'make a wrong diagnosis'. Priests however are human beings as well.

A. Arkhangelsky: Coming back to the problem of the Internet. The Internet is sometimes described as a rubbish heap. I would propose a different word – a wasteland. All who live in a rubbish heap are rats, while in a wasteland you can build what you believe necessary. If you wish it to be a brothel, a brothel it will be. If you wish to build a café, there will be a café. If you decide to erect a church, it will be a church, and if you think about installing a reading hall, there will be a reading hall. It is all up to us. The Internet leaves it to our conscience to make a decision about what is to be done.

Perhaps it makes a sense for the Church to enter, say, YouTube… You know, the youth like to see not big films but short reels, even amateurish, about life in regions. It may be worthwhile for someone to prompt parishioners to show not a grand solemn service as there is much of it as it is, but, for instance, a priest who drives a sick parishioner to hospital thirty kilometres away, doing the work of an ambulance. I think one should not be shy of showing it, not on television at that.

Metropolitan Hilarion: We are not shy of it at all. Yet people who are engaged in real work tend to think the least of how it should be demonstrated or told about.

Recently I have been to Bukovina… Imagine a place where there was an open field and nothing more. Now there is a monastery as enormous in size as perhaps the Diveyevo convent, with several churches. This monastery runs an orphanage a few kilometres away. There are over three hundred children in it, not only healthy but also sick ones, children living with HIV, a boy who was born without arms, Chernobyl children… They all live together. When I accompanied His Holiness the Patriarch to this orphanage, I could feel an atmosphere of real feast there. It all has been done on the initiative of a single man, who is a bishop now. He involved people who helped to open this orphanage. And now children, who have been gathered from railway stations and streets and parentless or abandoned children live and grow together in a house built especially for them. This priest for them (now a bishop) is the father. Besides, he has adopted sixty inmates and they bear his family name.

I had never heard this story until I came to that place. I am sure most of our TV viewers have not heard about it. We are told about some scandals, but this grandiose work is never mentioned. Certainly, we are also guilty to some extent, but the most of the guilt lies with the mass media themselves as they form the commission in the way to leave no room for positive information.

Arkhangelsky: I will cite another example. You have spoken about the social sphere, but I will refer to the symbolical one. Here is, for instance, the recent visit of His Holiness the Patriarch to Poland. Properly speaking, what can be more important? The peoples who have a score to settle and the Churches who have not always been kind in their relations suddenly begin to speak about a new stage in the relations of their countries and nations. But there was little talk about the fact that the Churches have blessed mutual love of our nations and countries.

There were perfectly fantastic episodes, if I do not confuse anything. Thus, the frescoes in the church which has been consecrated in Katyn, depicted, in particular, the Orthodox chaplain of the Polish Army (he is not canonized). Descendants of this Orthodox Polish chaplain who stood side by side with the executed Poles have been found. It is also symbolical but spoken little about.

Metropolitan Hilarion: Unfortunately, the visit of His Holiness the Patriarch to Poland took place in the days when the media space was filled with completely different events which seemed to attract the attention not proportional to their real importance.

I often have the feeling that our information space has turned into a Kingdom of Distorting Mirrows as people are told things about life quite different from what happens in reality. To be more correct, the mass media takes from our real life some particular facts linked first of all with scandal, with something negative. Such an enormous charge of negative information received by people from the mass media, the Internet and television is very difficult to be counterbalanced by anything different. Unfortunately, we as clergymen continually encounter the need to overcome the negative impact of the same television and the same mass media.

Once His Holiness Patriarch Kirill said that the Church has an enemy in every house and every flat – an enemy who works around the clock. This enemy is television. I do not like to introduce any antagonism between television and the Church because the Church does have an opportunity for working on television, and we at this moment are using this opportunity. In this sense, we should be grateful to the leaders of our TV channels who provide us with this opportunity. Yet I would like to say once again that in our society as a whole and in the mass media there should be more positive information including information coming from the Church. I think the more positive things the less aggression.

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