Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk answers questions from visitors to the website of the Synodal Information Department

Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk gives answers to the most interesting questions of visitors to the website of the Synodal Information Department under its Topical Interview project:

1. What does the Russian Orthodox Church participate in the World Council of Churches for? What are the contacts with the Catholics for? What is so valuable in what they have?
Alexy, St. Petersburg

The World Council of Churches (WCC) is a major Christian forum which has become a unique platform for regular meetings of representatives of various Churches and communities. Almost all the Local Orthodox Churches, all the Oriental (non-Chalcedonian) Churches and a variety of Protestant churches are members of this organization. The Roman Catholic Church, while not a WCC member, participates in the work of the Faith and Order Commission. Therefore, thanks to this organization, Christians from all over the world have an opportunity to conduct dialogue, seeking to overcome the existing differences and to participate together in discussions on social, political and ecological problems.

Like other Orthodox Churches, the Russian Orthodox Church as a WCC member sees her task in bearing witness to the Tradition of the Early Undivided Church. It does not mean that the Orthodox do not encounter problems within the WCC. One of them, for instance, concerned the procedure of decision-making in this organization. However, the coordinated cooperation of all the Orthodox members of the Council helps to solve such problems. In my view, it would be wrong to discontinue our membership in the WCC. If the Russian Church had not been a WCC member, she would not have the opportunities provided within this organization for carrying out her mission of preaching Orthodoxy. Contacts with other Churches would have been impeded.

As for the Roman Catholic Church, it should not be forgotten that it is the largest Church in the world, which represents the old western Christian tradition. Rome and Eastern Church were united throughout the first millennium of Christianity, and we are still united by many things. Despite the existing doctrinal differences between Orthodoxy and Catholicism, we have close positions on many topical issues, such as personal and public morality, bioethics, social problems. The Roman Catholic Church and Orthodox Churches have maintained active cooperation in these areas so that they may oppose together the moral decay we see in the modern world.

2. Is there a project or a valid procedure for offering residence in Russia to the Orthodox Christians persecuted for their faith in other countries of the world?
Vladislav, Lyubertsy, Moscow Region

There is no such project for exactly this purpose in Russia today. Today we often hear that persecuted Christians should be given conditions for free emigration to safer countries. Sometimes it is really the only possible way out. But if the guarantee of emigration becomes the main thrust of our efforts to protect our suffering brothers and sisters, wont' it only play into the hands of the persecutors? Their aim is exactly to press the Christian population out and to force them into emigration. On the contrary, we should do everything we can to ensure that Christians can feel safe in the land of their ancestors. In their own homeland they should not feel themselves second-rate citizens. Christian youth in the countries where Christians are persecuted should be given to know that their future is linked with their native land and that Christians do not live in it as undesired guests but as equal sons and daughters.

At the same time, I believe the Church, in her efforts to protect persecuted Christians, can rely on assistance from the state. During the recent meeting between Prime Minister V. V. Putin and leaders of the traditional confessions in Russia, I expressed the wish that the systematic protection of Christians living in the regions where they are persecuted today may become one of the directions in Russian foreign policy. I said to the prime minister that strong Russia is Russia which defends the Christian population in such countries, demanding among other things that guarantees for the respect of their rights be given in exchange for political and economic aid. Responding to these words, Vladimir Vladimirovich said, 'I do not doubt it will be so. No doubt whatsoever'.

3. Are there any negotiations conducted concerning the return of the church of St. Sophia in Constantinople to the Orthodox Church?
Vladislav, Lyubertsy, Moscow Region

It is a very complicated problem. I will remind you that the church of St. Sophia, which was built under Emperor Justinian in the 6th century, was the main cathedral of the capital city of the Byzantine Empire and the Patriarchate of Constantinople. After Constantinople was conquered in 1453, the church functioned as mosque till 1935, when by Atatürk's decree it was turned into a museum. At exactly that time, the plaster covering the surviving mosaics in the church interior was removed.

Outside Turkey, especially in the USA, there is a group of pro-active lay people fighting for restoring the status of acting Christian church to St. Sophia. Muslims, who make up an overwhelming majority in the Republic of Turkey, lay claim to it too. This problem needs an utterly delicate approach.

4. Why are there so few women working as leaders of official church organizations and there is still no woman leader of a synodal department? Isn't it discrimination on the ground of gender?
Yelena, Moscow

It should be noted that nowadays there are many women working in church administrative structures, who fulfil as important tasks as men do. Canonically, there are no obstacles for women to occupy leading posts in church institutions. If there are suitable candidates, then the supreme authorities of the Russian Orthodox Church may well make an appropriate decision. However, such an appointment should be reasonable, not demonstrative.

This question appears to have a certain implication. Perhaps, its author shares the idea popular nowadays about the equal role played in society by men and women – an idea actively imposed by countries of the Western world. In the traditional understanding, woman is guardian of the home, loving and careful wife and mother. She bears on her shoulders a great responsibility for the spirit of peace in the family. But the propagation of the opinion that the most important thing in one's life is career leads to negative consequences, to the eradication of the primordial predestination of woman.

The Church will not automatically assimilate alien social gender ideologies. Christian tradition proceeds from the affirmation that the 'strong' and the 'weak' sexes should complement each other and play special, not identical, roles in the society, family and Church. Attempts to obliterate differences between men and women are alarming signals of the impoverishment of society.

5. Can an Orthodox person come to Catholic churches or synagogues for the purpose of excursion? If so, how should he or she behave? As far as I can understand it, the Catholics do not kiss images of Virgin Mary?
Aelita (Anna), Moscow

An Orthodox person certainly can come to churches of other confession, especially when abroad or for the 'excursion purposes'. It is impossible to come to know the culture of another country without visiting churches in which the spiritual heritage of its people finds its expression. Is it possible, for instance, to come to Rome and fail to visit St. Peter's Cathedral or to come to Pairs and fail to drop in the Cathedral of Our Lady of Paris? Besides, these churches represent the highest models of religious art. Kept in them are great shrines of the entire Christian world, revered by the Orthodox Church as well. I mean the relics of St. Peter in the cathedral of his name in Rome and the Crown of Thorns in the Cathedral of Our Lady of Paris. And these are only two examples. In many churches in the West, there are shrines which attract Orthodox pilgrims as well. Among the most revered shrines are the relics of St. Wonder-Worker kept in a Catholic basilica in Bari. When you stand before such shrines even if they are kept not in Orthodox churches, naturally you can pray before them and venerate them.

In visiting churches of other confessions, you should show respect for them as places of prayer and worship.

6. Humbleness is one's awareness of oneself as being the most sinful and worst of all. Does it mean that a humble one is a person with low self-assessment? What should be the self-assessment of an Orthodox Christian?
Yulia, Nizhniy Novgorod

'We are unworthy servants' (Lk. 17:10). This is how the Lord recommends His disciples to assess themselves regardless of their actions, talents or abilities. A person who has been brought up on the ideals of the culture of consumption and who seeks only success in this life and puts his ego in the center of his life will see this requirement as ridiculous. But the very message of crucified Christ has been taken as insane by the world in all times. But in fact 'the wisdom of this world is folly with God' (1 Cor. 3:19), while the spiritual poverty, which is humbleness according to St. Gregory of Nyssa, is great richness in the eye of God.

Spiritual poverty and humbleness are not a weakness but a great power. It is the ability to open one's heart to God, which is possible only one overcomes one's egoism and passions generated by it.

'The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise' the Prophet David says in Psalm 51. It means that the Lord will not destroy the personality of one who frees in his heart a room for God. Only in this case, a person becomes able to communicate with God and therefore to attain the fullness of life and happiness. And to attain it, it doesn't matter how high our self-assessment is. What is important is how God will assess us.

7. Christian love presupposes self-abandonment, desire to sacrifice your interests for the interests of others. In this case, there is no room left for seeking one's own goals and individual growth. Should a person really earth his abilities and talents and live the life of another? How to define the boundary between self-sacrifice and one's own self-fulfilment?
Yulia, Nizhny Novgorod

I do not see any contradiction between Christian love and personal growth. On the contrary, it is Christian love that helps to develop his best qualities in a person and to truly realize his abilities. But love can really prevent one from achieving some goals in life, if one's principal purpose is to obtain earthly wealth by all means.

Yes, it is possible to pay the price of others' happiness in order to achieve in this life what is understood

as success. But it will not bring joy. It can be confirmed by many examples. How many people, successful and well-established by the temporal yardsticks, seek oblivion in alcohol, drugs and other means of withdrawal from such seemingly beautiful reality!

If you use your God-given talents only for yourself, by doing so you earth them. But if you put your talents at the service of your neighbours you will multiply them and obtain the highest and imperishable richness – eternal life. Certainly, this argument is valid only for those who perceive eternity not as an abstract notion but reality, that is, it is valid only for believers.

As for a boundary between self-sacrifice and self-fulfilment, it is defined by the power of your love.

8 The Church has always forbidden divorce and called to preserve the family. But nowadays there are divorces on religious grounds, when one of the spouses finds God and begins to impose the ecclesial way of life on members of the family who are reluctant to it. As a result, such growing religiosity leads to quarrels and conflicts and sometimes even to divorce. How to restore peace lost in a family?
Yulia, Nizhniy Novgorod

Divorces on religious grounds happen only when one of the spouses, having found God, has a false understanding of his or her duty towards members of the family, showing ‘zeal not according to reason’. One cannot impose the church way of life on one’s family if they do not want it. ‘A slave is not a devotee’, the popular wisdom says. Religiosity (I mean Christian, the gospel’s religiosity) should be manifested first of all in love, which ‘is patient and kind…; it is not arrogant or rude... It bears all things…, endures all things’ (1 Cor. 13:4-7).

Of course, a person who has discovered for himself the joy of faith wants to share it with his loved ones as he loves them and wishes them well. But the best way for it is personal example, so that people, having seen the light coming from their loved believer, would wish to follow him. But if it does not happen, one should not give way to despair. Indeed, according to St. Paul, ‘the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband’ (1 Cor. 7:14).

9. What is the Church’s attitude to misalliance (by age), when, for instance, the husband is 20 years or more his wife senior and actually may be old enough to be her father? Is such a marital union considered immoral or sinful?
Yulia, Nizhniy Novgorod

A difference in age is not an obstacle for marriage if it is based on something greater that a wish to draw some profit, even if mutual. For Christians, marriage is not just a legal contract, a means of reproduction

or meeting one's temporal natural needs, but, according to St. John Chrysostom, it is a 'sacrament of love', eternal union of spouses in Christ. The creation of a Christian family is the creation of a domestic church all members of which have as their goal to grow in spirit and truth. The solidity of Christian marriage is based on love which is inseparably bound up with self-sacrifice.

If however the conclusion of marriage is used to pursue egoistic aims, such as pleasure, wealth, social status, etc. then such a marriage is not durable from the beginning, regardless of a difference in age.

10. What is the role of the Russian Orthodox Church in the world Orthodoxy today? Will the authority of our Church, the largest among Local Churches, affect the discussions held in anticipation of the forthcoming Pan-Orthodox Council?
Olga, Moscow

The Russian Orthodox Church, which has existed for over 1000 years now and which went through the crucible of unprecedented persecution and oppression from the atheistic power in the 20th century, is at present the most dynamically developing and growing Church. The regeneration and rise of the Russian Church has been taken with inspiration by Local Orthodox Church relations with which are on the rise at the present time.

Among the important areas of cooperation with other Local Church are preparations for a Pan-Orthodox Council. The Moscow Patriarchate delegation is most actively involved in all the meetings of the Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commission and Pan-Orthodox Pre-Council Conferences. I believe, in the course of the sessions of the Council itself, the positions taken by the Russian Orthodox Church on every item of the agenda will be appropriately taken into account.

For the voice of each Church, regardless of its size and importance in the past and the present, to be heard, we consistently advocate the principle of consensus in making pan-Orthodox decisions both on the stage of preparation and in the course of the forthcoming Council. Besides, we regard as of no small importance the principles of representation at the Council, which we are still to discuss with other Local Churches. By its very designation as Great, the Council we believe should enjoy the participation of at least all the canonical Orthodox hierarchs ruling dioceses. We hope to hear at the Council the consolidated voice of the entire Orthodoxy which will manifest the true unity of the Orthodox Church and her unshakable commitment to the apostolic and patristic tradition.

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