DECR chairman gives talk to Orthodox youth at Central House of Journalists

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On October 4, 2011, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, head of the Moscow Patriarchate's department for external church relations, read a lecture on the Eucharist as the Core of the Christian's Life as part of the Public Orthodox Lectures given in the Central House of Journalists. He spoke about the essence and goal of this most important Christian sacrament and its theological meaning. He also dwelt upon such practical matters such as the frequency of communion and preparation for it.

After the lecture the archpastor was asked numerous questions from the audience concerning the theme of his talk.

Q. Did we understand it correctly that the sacrament of the Eucharist, unlike our ordinary meal, is not something we digest but, on the contrary, it assimilates us to itself?

A. It can be expressed in both ways. We assimilate the sacrament because even the physical essence of the bread and wine made the Body and Blood of Christ become part of our physical essence. And at the same time we become part of one Body of Christ when we unite with Him.

Q. You have said that it is important not only to partake of the Holy gifts of Christ but also to attend the service fully. What do you think: the youth should be first brought to church and then shown the benefit of church sacraments? Just as culture including classical music can transform a young man?

A. Of course, for one to develop a desire to attend the service in full, not only to take communion, one should understand it. And for one to understand the meaning of the service it is important to have such initiatives as a series of lectures for the youth, in which I participate today. I am glad to see you all here, in this overcrowded hall, and I am glad that the topic of the Eucharist – which seem irrelevant to topical events as presented in the news programs – has provoked such a lively interest.

It is my deep conviction that in the life of a Christian, be he a clergyman or a layman, there is nothing more important than participation in the liturgy and in the Eucharist. And for those in the Church who are invested with the teaching power there is no task more important than to teach people to understand the church service, to expose them to the mysteries of the divine service and to show them the beauty and significance of the sacraments, first of all, the sacrament of the holy Eucharist.

Certainly, this teaching can be done not only through words but also through icons, church art including church music and, in a broader sense, through classical music as many of its best pieces are filled to a considerable extent with profound spiritual and religious content. So, it is possible to say that religious art including music plays a very important missionary role in our modern society.

Q. What is the meaning of the biblical words that the Lord 'reclined' during the Last Supper?

A. It was in the tradition of that time not to sit but to recline at table. They lay edgewise, with the head propped up in hand. For this position they had special divans. The Last Super was held according to this custom. We see a different picture in icons but historically it was like that.

Q. There is a practice of imposing a penance on a person who committed a grave sin: he is deprived of communion. In your view, how reasonable and rightful is it?

A. It is reasonable and rightful if the priest is sure that this punishment will bring forth fruit and help one to become aware of one's sinfulness and ultimately will bring the penitent closer to God rather than take him further away from Him. Regrettably, in our time a denial of communion often means that one simply has to withdraw from a profound religious life. Therefore, an individual approach is needed in this case, and every spiritual father should make a very well considered and accurate decision.

Q. What should be Orthodox people's attitude to the sacrament of communion in the Roman Catholic Church and its validity and gracefulness? What unites us in this respect?

A. This question has no unambiguous and commonly accepted answer in the Orthodox Church today. There are different points of view in Local Orthodox Churches as well as within one Church and even within one parish two priests may have different attitudes to the validity of sacraments in Catholic and

other Christian communities.

There are certain rules and guidelines which can be considered the official position of the Moscow Patriarchate. They are set forth in the document on Basic Principles of the Russian Orthodox Church's Attitude to non-Orthodoxy. It does not state any recognition or non-recognition of the validity of the sacraments but it notes that in dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church we should proceed from the fact that this Church maintains the apostolic continuity of ordinations. Besides, there is de facto recognition of the Catholic Church's sacraments in case of a Catholic becoming Orthodox. It is necessary to distinguish here between the recognition of the sacrament of Baptism and recognition of other sacraments. We accept people without re-baptizing them, even those from Protestant confessions, but at the same time if a Protestant pastor joined the Orthodox Church he would be accepted as a lay person, while a Catholic priest or bishop changing to the Orthodox Church is accepted as respectively priest or bishop, that is, in this case there is actual recognition of the sacrament administered to him.

How this sacrament is to be interpreted is another matter. There is a very wide range of opinions here. I can say one thing: there is no Eucharistic communion between the Orthodox and the Catholics. There is a certain church discipline which does not allow the faithful of the Orthodox Church to take communion with the Catholics.

Q. If one who failed to fast for three days and to read the Penitential Canon but wants very much to take communion comes to church, can he take communion after making confession?

A. I believe all the recommendations as to the preparation for communion are not aimed at putting one away from the sacrament but at helping a believer to be better prepared for it. Of course, these rules are meaningful for those who know them and understand the need to observe them.

At the same time I should say that the rule of three-day fasting before communion allegedly prescribed by church canons or statute does not exist. As simple as that. There is a tradition, which developed in the Synodal era when people took communion very rarely and communion was seen as some special event in the life of a Christian. At that time it was prescribed of course to hold fast before communion, while there were different rules. For instance, some said one should hold fast for a week.

I believe today, if one who lives a full-fledged church life wishes to take communion frequently, especially if one observes the fasts established by the Church (our calendar prescribes a fair amount of

fasting days, as you know) there is no need to impose on one some additional fasts in excess of those established by the church statute and calendar. But these questions are to be ultimately settled with your own spiritual father.

Q. What can be done to bring home to the faithful the meaning of the Eucharist?

A. I believe a priest can communicate to people only that which he himself has experienced. But if what he says in church is based only on other people's experience, on books he read, on deductions and if he in his address to people proceeds from what he believes they need, without addressing his words to himself, then the preaching of this priest may turn into a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal (cf. 1 Cor. 13:1). The task of every priest is the empirical spiritual experience of encounter with Christ which is the core of the Eucharist. If this experience takes place during the Divine Liturgy, he will find words to convey this spiritual experience to other people. In case he fails to find these words the very image of his sacred actions will involve people in this common cause. Indeed, we know that much depends on the way in which a priest celebrates the Liturgy. Sometimes people are reluctant to take part in the service not because it is celebrated in a language unintelligible for them or they themselves are not prepared adequately but because the service is performed carelessly, hastily and inarticularly.

I believe a priest who is going to celebrate the Liturgy should, on entering the church, collect his thoughts and feelings. He should understand that it is the most important cause of his life for which he will have to answer at the last judgment. And if a priest burns with love of God, the holy altar, the holy Eucharist, then, even if he does not have a higher education and eloquence, he will still involve many people by the very way in which he celebrates the Eucharist and convince them of its truth and vital importance for the salvation of each.

Q. Have I a right to expect that in partaking of the communion I will receive some changes in my life, socially and emotionally, or it is a magic?

A. You do have the right to expect it, though the mechanism here is more complex. The Eucharist makes an impact on us like a medicine on a sick person. Sometimes s sick person is clearly aware of his illness and the medicine he has to take, but he cannot always predict the response of his organism to these medicines: will they work straight away or gradually. I can say one thing: the Eucharist is never inactive for one if one participates in this sacrament with all his nature, if this sacrament does not become for one a mere formality, as is sometimes the case, or an action to honour tradition.

It is not accidental that in the Eucharistic prayers much attention is given to one's proper inner preparation. I do not mean the formal signs of this preparation, such as fasting, reading canons or prayers, but one's spiritual disposition with which one should approach the sacrament. If this spiritual disposition is lacking, one should not take communion so that one may not communicate to be judged. On the other hand, if one has no such disposition, it is precisely a sign of spiritual illness, and where there is an illness one needs a medicine, and the Eucharist is the primary medicine the Church offers us for all our illnesses.

Q. Is it proper to treat the Eucharist as a miracle, as John of Kronstadt put it?

A. In my view, the Eucharist is the greatest of miracles which can happen in the life of a man and in the life of the Church. To take part in this miracle one does not have to go to the Holy Land, to buy air tickets, to fit up planes, to set off for a long pilgrimage. It is sufficient to come to the nearest church. And if your health prevents you from coming to church, a priest can come to you and the miracle will happen before your eyes.

Regrettably, in our church milieu today there is a fascination with miracles akin to what existed as far back as the time of Christ when the Saviour was asked: Show us a miracle and we will believe in you. Sometime people undertake long journeys with many obstacles to become witnesses to much-advertised wonders, while the miracle happening in each church, on each altar every time when the Divine Eucharist is celebrated remains unnoticed and seen as something routine. Unnoticed are also the changes made in very many people – their spiritual transformation. A priest who keeps in close contact with his flock can see this transformation with his own eyes. I know not of a greater miracle to happen to some of my parishioners through their participation in the sacrament of the Eucharist.

Q. Speaking of the practice of frequent communion, how often one should make confession?

A. This question had better be asked of your spiritual father because the paradigms vary. There is a general confession, though it is not a norm because confession should be individual. But the question of relation between confession and the Eucharist is not an easy one because today some people see in confession a sort of a ticket to communion, as famous theologian Father Alexander Schmemann used to put it. Unfortunately, it happens so that those who do not take communion stand in the central part of the Church while those who have come to communicate stand throughout the service in the side chapel where confessions are taken. And it is only by the moment when the Cup is brought out that they can at best be free from standing in line. There is a certain anomaly here, which should be removed by means

at the priests' disposal.

Q. In your lecture you said that parishioners are not part of the service today. Is it right?

A. It is not right, and I said that con-celebration is a term applicable to the whole community. By the very fact of your coming to church for the liturgy, especially when you come by the beginning of the service, you show that you are a necessary and significant part of the church organism. In the early Church, it was very vividly expressed in the active participation of the people in the service itself. Thus, when the priest addressed the worshippers, they responded by saying, 'Lord, have mercy'. It is practiced in some places today too. For instance, a few years ago I happened to be in Transcarpathian Region and to participate in a service there. They have no choir at all as the liturgy is sung by the people themselves. The people feel really involved in the common cause. In this situation, it is difficult to imagine the liturgy without the people.

The participation of parishioners in the liturgy may have different forms. Each place has its own traditions, but a lay person who sees himself or herself as an unnecessary part of the liturgy is wrong. And a visible expression of this feeling is the fact that people do not come for the beginning of the service because they know that the service will start and finish regardless of their coming or not coming.

Q. In your lecture you repeated that during communion we are united with Christ mentally and physically but in the Gospel there are words that during the Last Supper when Jesus Christ offered a piece to Judah Satan entered into him. How should we treat these words?

A. These words are about what we call unworthy communion when one comes to communion without what St. Paul called reasoning, without being aware of the magnificence of this sacrament and of one's own sinfulness and unworthiness. It is one of the leitmotifs of both the Divine Liturgy and the prayers in preparation for communion.

I tried to show that there is no one worthy of communion but the awareness of one's unworthiness should not deter a believer from partaking in the Holy Gifts of Christ. We communicate precisely because we are unworthy, because we are ill and need to be healed. But the attitude to illness, doctor and medicine can vary. For instance, one may believe that one does not need either this medicine or doctor, that one is healthy, while actually one is seriously ill. And we, being aware of the need of a doctor, come to the spiritual hospital, which is the Church of Christ.

There is a parable: The Lord gave one old man a spiritual vision of the liturgy. The old man saw a church in which the liturgy was celebrated but not a single prayer by either the priest or the deacon or any other people reached God. How is this to be understood? Does the grace of God come down all the same, even if a priest is not worthy of it? The grace comes down because everything depends not only on his prayer but also on the prayer of the whole community. Besides, the Church never links the question of a priest's worthiness or unworthiness with the question of the validity or invalidity of the sacraments he administers. Again, there is no priest worthy of his ministry. When the Cherubic Hymn starts, the priest reads the prayer: 'O King of Glory, no one is worthy to come to You, to draw near to You, or to perform a service for You when he is bound down by desires and pleasures of the flesh'. In this prayer addressed to God the priest confesses his unworthiness.

It is important that we should not pray automatically, mechanically or just by habit as sometimes the case with those who pronounce the words with their lips while their mind is somewhere far away. It is especially noticeable if this happens to a priest during the Divine Liturgy. The faithful feel it and begin to divert their attention away. For this reason I say that to participate in the Liturgy each one requires special inner recollection. It is like a ship which has captain, for without captain the ship can run aground or collide with an iceberg. On the other hand, if all the rest – machinist, navigator, watchman and others do not work each in his place, a tragedy may happen. Thus, the fate of a ship depends on each member of the crew.

Q. Can a non-Orthodox Christian take communion in an Orthodox church if he was married in the Orthodox Church?

A. No, he cannot. It is possible only if he embraces Orthodoxy. If he is already baptized, baptism is not repeated, and then he may take communion.

Q. Is communion possible without confession and how much these sacraments are connected?

A. It is not practiced in the Russian Orthodox Church but in some other Local Churches people take communion without making confession, as a rule. For instance, in Greek churches they come for the liturgy and communicate while confession has become a fairly rare thing.

You ask this question because you are a member of the Russian Church in which communion is very closely linked with confession. If the Church is likened to hospital and Christ to doctor, it is important that we should understand that the Church has various medicines for various illnesses. One can say that communion is a comprehensive medicine. But there are also other remedies. Why confession is so important? It is needed not only to let one partake of the Holy Gifts of Christ but also for a repentant to become aware of his sins and to make some self-analysis before the face of God and before the face of the priest. Confession in itself has a transforming effect but it does not unite man with God in the way it happens in the Eucharist.

We call the Eucharist the Sacrament of the Sacraments and speak about it as the core of the life of the Church. The sacrament of baptism is called the gates to the Church but about confession and anointing, for instance, we also speak as sacraments which have a healing power.

The sacrament of the Eucharist occupies a special place in the life of the Church. At the same time, all the sacraments are linked with one another. If you are a baptized person you will marry in the Church. If you fall seriously ill you will invite a priest for the anointing of the sick. If you have a child you will bring him or her to church for baptism. If you have sinned (and all people sin), you will come for confession.

One sacrament cannot be artificially separated from another or artificially opposed to another. Some people believe they should by all means be anointed once a year even if they are not ill at all, because in the sacrament of anointing the forgotten sins are forgiven. And some even believe that the sacrament of anointing as if makes up for confession and that what they failed to mention during confession will be written off during anointing. This is not so at all. If one has made confession with the whole of one's heart and mentioned everything sinful one sees in oneself, then all his sins will be forgiven. The priest in the prayer of absolution says, 'I forgive and absolve you of all your sins', that is, he absolves you not of the sins you have confessed but 'all sins'. In this lies the healing and saving power of the sacrament of confession. But confession cannot replace the Eucharist, just as the Eucharist, being the Sacrament of the Sacraments and the core of Christian church life, does not cancel other sacraments.

DECR Communication Service

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