



Metropolitan Hilarion: Life is given for us to exercise in virtue

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On April 3, the Fourth Sunday of Lent when the memory of St. John Climacus is celebrated, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, head of the Moscow Patriarchate's department for external church relations, celebrated the Divine Liturgy at the church of Our Lady the Joy to All the Afflicted in Moscow. Among his con-celebrants were Archbishop Niphon of Philippopolis, representative of the Patriarch of Great Antioch to the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, Bishop Anthony of Moravici, representative of the Patriarch of Serbia to the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, Hegumen Philip (Riabykh), Moscow Patriarchate representative in Strasbourg, and other church officials and clergy. Among the worshippers was Archbishop Jonathan of Tulsa and Braclaw.

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The Moscow Synodal Choir conducted by Russia's Honoured Artist A. Puzakov performed compositions by Metropolitan Hilarion, Archbishop Jonathan, D. Bortnyansky, N. Danilin and Yu. Kostiuk.

After the service, the DECR chairman greeted the archpastors present in the church and delivered a sermon reminding the faithful that the Church commemorated on that day St. John Climacus known to most believers as the author of the book *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. He said:

“This book was written in the 7th century for the monks on Mount Sinai, but it is still relevant today. It presents the entire spiritual life of a Christian as a ladder of ascent to God. There are thirty stairs in it, each representing either rejection of a particular vice or acquisition of a particular virtue. The secret is that in one's ascent on this ladder it is impossible to get rid of only one vice and to acquire only one virtue. One has to keep repeating one's steps getting rid of each of one's passion, sin and sinful habit and acquiring the virtues necessary for one to become a true Christian and to unite with Christ in the next life and to become a heir to the Heavenly Kingdom.

“It is not in the same way and in the same order that all people get rid of vices and acquire virtues. And not everyone will be able to follow in the steps of St. John of the Ladder and to step over all the thirty stairs. But there in one thing that we all should know: life is given for us to exercise in virtue and to get rid of vices, sinful habits and inclinations. If the Lord lost hope for our reformation He would put an end to our earthly life to make us move into a different existence. If the Lord has patience for us here, on earth, it means that there is a hope for our reformation.

“Therefore, if one has bad habits or inclinations one should use the time of one’s life to get rid of them. How he does it depends on himself. Everyone struggles with one’s passions in one’s own way. But the most terrible thing is one’s reluctance to struggle with them and getting accustomed to them when one says to oneself: I am as I am. I cannot become different because God has made me such. God has created each of us for us to grow in the life of virtue. Every day and many times a day the Lord gives us an opportunity for good works but we refuse it often due to our laziness, negligence, tiredness, faint-heartedness and weakness. Similarly the Lord gives each one a repeated opportunity to avoid evil deeds and thoughts and to get rid of sinful habits but we do not try to improve ourselves because of inertia or faint-heartedness.

“The main task for each of us is to work to improve ourselves continually and daily, asking God’s help in this spiritual journey leading up to the Heavenly Kingdom. But how often we begin to try to improve others rather than ourselves! We wish to reform those around us because we think we believe them to be different from what they should be. And how difficult it is to make another person what we hope to see in him! But our aim is not to improve other people. We will be able to improve them only if we improve ourselves. We will be able to teach those around us to live the Christian life if only we live up virtues rather than talk about them.

“It is not accidental that St. Seraphim of Sarov said: ‘Seek the spirit of peace and thousands around you will be saved’. Until we have the spirit of peace in our own selves, until we follow firmly the way of virtue leading up to the Heavenly Kingdom, we will not be able to prove anything to anybody or to teach anybody anything. We should live in the way that makes people say: This is a Christian. I would like to follow his example. It will be the most eloquent preaching.

“Therefore, let us use the time of our earthly life, especially the Lenten days as a time for double abstinence and double feat to exercise in virtues, to eradicate bad habits and to work to improve ourselves thus transforming people and the world around us. Let us pray to St. John Climacus that he may be our helper in this journey. Amen”.

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