Archbishop Hilarion of Volokolamsk: ‘A woman can hold major leading positions in the Church’

Speaking about the role of woman in the Church on the Church and the World TV talk-show on December 12, 2009, Archbishop Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate department for external church relations, answered questions from TV-viewers.

He said in particular that a woman can hold major leading positions in the Church, citing mothers-superior of major convents who run large households and direct hundreds of nuns. He noted that an absolute majority of precenters in Russian Orthodox churches are also women who sometimes conduct very large professional choirs.

‘It’s quite a different story that in the Russian Orthodox Church, just as in the Roman Catholic Church, a woman cannot become a priest. It is because we preserve the church order which was formed in the early centuries of Christianity and established by Christ Himself and His apostles’, the archbishop said.

‘In Christian tradition, priesthood has always been associated with the service of men, and there is no discrimination whatsoever here. It’s simply different functions, just as fatherhood belongs to men, while motherhood to women. One cannot say that a woman is deprived of anything because she can be only a mother and cannot be a father’, the DECR chairman explained.

He also said that in church practice ‘there are various forms of the self-organization of lay people, including women, in which women who wish to take an active part in church life can find their calling’.

Asked about the requirements that the Russian Orthodox Church sets for woman-parishioners’ clothes, His Eminence Hilarion said that it depends on national customs and traditions. ‘Our parishes and dioceses in Western Europe do not know of any bans at all with regard to women’s clothes’, he said, adding that for over 80 years now pantsuits have been manufactured both in Russia and the West; therefore one can no longer call trousers a piece of purely men’s clothes. ‘The Lord looks at a person’s heart, rather then at his or her clothing’, he assured.

The DECR chairman expressed regret at those cases where young men in casual clothes and young women in trousers come to church ‘to seek understanding and compassion but are met with peremptory shouts and abuse’. He described this attitude as ‘an illness to be struggled with’.

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