Archbishop Hilarion of Volokolamsk explains to foreign journalists the Russian Orthodox Church's stand on problems facing today's society

During his meeting with foreign journalists on 11 November 2009, Archbishop Hilarion of Volokolamsk answered questions concerning urgent problems of society today.

Asked about the Church's view of some problems of bioethics, especially the use of artificial life-support systems to prolong the life of a patient, he said,

'It is a very complicated issue. We in the Orthodox Church do not believe that one's life should be certainly prolonged by artificial means. We believe a human being is born when it pleases God and dies when it pleases God. Complications arise when artificial life-support systems are used in a critical situation when there is a hope for one's survival and return to normal life. But then one's organism as if adjusts itself to these machines without one's regaining consciousness. One continues to live in a vegetative state and here a complicated dilemma arises indeed: who can switch off these machines thus actually killing a patient? I believe there is no unambiguous answer to this question and perhaps there cannot be such, and the situation has to be resolved differently in every particular case'. He also underlined the importance of cooperation between medics and the Church in solving complicated ethical problems.

Asked to comment the statement on General A. Vlasov adopted by the Bishops' Synod of the Russian Church Outside Russia, the archbishop pointed out that this statement provoked hot debates and sincere indignation among many faithful of the Moscow Patriarchate. 'I believe there is no way we in Russia can associate ourselves with such a statement because a betrayal is a betrayal and no historical assessment can put on equal footing those who gave their lives for their country and those who committed high treason.

'It does not mean that we deny the crimes of the Stalinist regime', Archbishop Hilarion remarked and reminded his audience that it was not Hitlerite Germany but the Soviet Union that was supported during the war by the United States, Great Britain and many other countries. 'Everybody realised that Fascism was an antihuman ideology which, if triumphant, would put the countries of Europe and even the whole world in the gravest situation', he said, stressing that any reassessment of those events was inadmissible.

On the other hand, he continued, it should be remembered that at that tragic time people on both sides were often victims and hostages of their own regimes. ‘In this situation, the Church’s assessment of those events should be one of values and value of human life. But, I repeat, it does not mean that we can now justify any crime committed at that time, be it betrayal or high treason’, he concluded.

Asked about Russia’s modernization, the need for which was repeatedly mentioned by the state leaders, His Eminence said, ‘The task of the Church is to always promote the spiritual welfare of the people. Therefore, when modernization is at stake it is very important to remember that it should not be carried out through destruction of historically-shaped realities or models of behaviour or what we describe as the spirituality and civilization code’.

He reminded the journalists that Russia’s modernization introduced by Peter I, though bringing the country closer to the West, was carried out at the price of destruction of the established traditions. ‘It stratified society into people with very different worldviews and actually predetermined the processes that two hundred years later were to lead to a Bolshevik revolution. Therefore any modernization should be realized in such a way as to avoid people’s suffering but to raise people’s welfare without producing side effects which can bring to naught the positive results of this modernization’, he underlined.

Asked about the Church’s mission to the youth, Archbishop Hilarion answered, ‘The Church today is very open to the youth, and the tone here is set by His Holiness Patriarch Kirill himself. He has often met with large youth audiences, the latest taking place on November 4, at Manezh Square. Earlier he had such meetings in St. Petersburg, in Ukraine and Belarus. I believe his example will mobilize not only the younger but also middle-aged and even senior generations of our clergy’.

He reminded the journalists that Patriarch Kirill called upon the clergy to be open to bearers of youth sub-cultures. ‘Today the Church cannot close up in its parishes, celebrating and preaching to those who come for the services. We should also use the ways of missionary work which have not been typical for the Orthodox Church until recently’, he remarked.

Asked about the teaching of Basic Orthodox Culture, the DECR chairman said, ‘The position of the Church remains unchanged here. We believe the Basic Orthodox Culture should be taught to Russia’s young citizens’, adding that this discipline should be taught on a voluntary basis within the curriculum. ‘If a student does not want to study Basic Orthodox Culture, he or she can study the basics of Islamic culture or secular ethics. In other words, there must be a choice between these disciplines but not an optional class like a drawing or sewing hobby group’, he added.

DECR Communication Service

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