Metropolitan Hilarion spoke about how the Russian Orthodox Church will celebrate Christmas during pandemic



On January 2nd, 2021, on The Church and the World TV program shown on Saturdays and Sundays on "Rossiya-24", Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, Chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations (DECR), answered questions fr om the anchor Ekaterina Gracheva.

E. Gracheva: Hello! This is the time of the program "The Church and the World" on the TV channel "Rossia 24", where we talk weekly with the Chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk. Hello, Vladyka!

Metropolitan Hilarion: Hello, Catherine! Hello dear brothers and sisters!

E. Gracheva: Vladyka, soon the Orthodox Christians will celebrate Christmas. This time, for obvious reasons, because of the pandemic, Catholic countries celebrated the so-called Online Christmas, many churches were closed. How will it be in our country? Many believers in the regions have already been advised to celebrate this Christmas at home.

Metropolitan Hilarion: In most regions of our country, as far as I know, there are no restrictions on visiting churches. In some regions, there are restrictions on the number of people in churches, as well as recommendations to wear a mask during worship and maintain a social distance. I think this is how it will continue to happen.

But the Russian Orthodox Church, as you know, exists not only in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus,but also in the neighbouring countries and far abroad. At some parishes of the Russian Orthodox Church, located in foreign countries, probably, some people will not be able to celebrate Christmas in the church. But we, of course, recommend that our elderly parishioners who live in Moscow and in a number of regions of the Russian Federation, if possible, do not visit churches, but follow the services through live broadcasts.

For elderly parishioners who are unable to come to the church, we have organized home visits by priests so that they can take confession, partake of the Holy Communion. This way, a person who is physically unable to stay in the church is not deprived of either participating in the church service through a live broadcast, or participating in the sacraments of the Church through the visit of a priest.

E. Gracheva: Vladyka, at services during the pandemic, I have repeatedly witnessed that parishioners are required to wear masks, are not allowed to kiss the chalice after communion, however, the spoon that is used to distribute Communion does not get disinfected afterwards. As a patient with antibodies, I take this calmly, without fear of getting infected or infecting others. But aren't there double standards in this approach to the celebration of the Liturgy?

Metropolitan Hilarion: It is with great regret that I must say that not all parishes are implementing the recommendations that were given by His Holiness the Patriarch and approved by the Holy Synod in March 2020. These recommendations relate to various hygienic and sanitary measures that must be observed during the distribution of communion. In particular, it is not allowed to kiss the chalice after communion, it is recommended to wipe the communion cup with an alcohol-soaked handkerchief after each communicant. In some parishes, there is a practice to wash the spoon after each communicant, first in alcohol, and then in hot water.

I was quite shocked a few days ago when I was celebrating a divine service in a church where I was a guest, and before the service began, I asked the priest: how will communion be performed? He told me that alcohol and hot water would be provided for communion without fail. When I received communion in this parish, a person was standing next to me with a vessel of alcohol and hot water, and after each communion I dipped the spoon first in alcohol, then in hot water, that is, a complete disinfection of the

spoon was performed after each communicant. But, unfortunately, the priests of this parish, who also received communion at the same time as me, did not do any of this. It never even occurred to me that a priest might treat a bishop's visit in such a way, that is, we will do what you want for you, but we will act in the old-fashioned way, as if there are no epidemic restrictions.

Unfortunately, this is the reality of our church life. In our Church, it is not like in the army, where an order is given and everyone is obliged to obey it. In the Church, an order is actually given by the Patriarch and the Holy Synod, but not all priests execute it. Therefore, I once again call on our clergy to live not with their own minds, not with their own private opinions, but to obey the Hierarchy, to do what the Patriarch and the Holy Synod command.

E. Gracheva: The Bishops ' Council of the Moscow Patriarchate promises to give a church-wide assessment of the new challenges associated with the pandemic, as well as various anti-epidemic measures and restrictions. This was announced by the Patriarch before the New Year. This is exactly what I'm thinking: the adoption of uniform sanitary standards for all churches and monasteries?

Metropolitan Hilarion: Yes, that's right. It is very important that the standard is unified, so that there is no arbitrariness here, which I have already described. We really do have a very different understanding of what this pandemic is and what threats it poses. It is very important that clergymen do not live in their own minds, but listen to the voice of the Hierarchy, because when we develop these measures and adopt them at the level of the Holy Synod, it is all done not "out of the blue". We consult with the sanitary authorities; we study historical precedents; we refer to the canons of our Church and their interpretations. We refer to such authoritative publications as, for example, S. V. Bulgakov's "Clergyman's Handbook", published at the beginning of the XX century, which also contains very detailed recommendations concerning communion during the epidemic. That is, we don't just come up with anything, but make all the decisions after careful study. In this regard, it is very important that there is a common practice and common approaches.

After all, we are responsible not only for ourselves. Some people say: I'm not afraid of a pandemic. Others say: it is God's will, as it happens, so it will happen, if I am destined to survive, I will survive, and if God takes me away, it means that it pleases Him. This is an irresponsible and frivolous approach, not to mention an un-ecclesiastical approach, because of course the will of God is done in human life, but human stupidity or carelessness cannot be justified by the will of God. There are things that God wills, and there are things that He permits to happen. For example, He permits people to live by their own stupidity, but this does not justify any of their silly actions.

The Lord is now calling us to take responsibility for our own lives and for the lives of the people around us. Even if you don't believe that this pandemic will affect you, if you don't care whether you live or die, then think about other people: they do care. After all, every person can be a carrier of this virus. Any failure to comply with the rules can be fraught with danger not only for your own life, but also for the lives of people around you.

E. Gracheva: In Moscow, three times as many priests and monks died last year as a year earlier. Such statistics were provided by Patriarch Kirill. It is frightening because it shows that these people are at risk. What additional measures, in addition to the proposed ones by the Rospotrebnadzor, can the Church offer to protect the clergy fr om the epidemic?

Metropolitan Hilarion: These statistics show, first of all, that the clergy are at the forefront of the fight against coronavirus. Why? Because the vast majority of clergy cannot simply isolate themselves. They need to be with people, communicate with people. But even compliance with all anti-epidemic measures does not save a person fr om contracting coronavirus. Despite the fact that, as I have already said, not all clergymen, unfortunately, comply with these measures. Hence, a significant number of cases and deaths from coronavirus. We need to learn from the past year and avoid making similar mistakes in the coming year.

We are all responsible for each other and for our parishioners. As a person who was ill with the coronavirus myself, and then got vaccinated against it, I would like to wish all clergy to get vaccinated against this terrible disease, if possible. I would like to emphasize that the coronavirus vaccination, just like any other vaccination, is a voluntary matter. No one should force a person, whether a clergyman or a lay person, to be vaccinated or not. But I have already said many times and I repeat it again: the risks of vaccination are not comparable to those borne by a person who has the opportunity to become infected with coronavirus and carry this disease with the most severe and sometimes fatal consequences.

I repeat once again that this is my personal opinion, and not a church-wide position, saying that everyone should now run to the vaccination centers. But every day, a person who is not ill and does not have enough antibodies in their blood to overcome the virus is at risk. Vaccination eliminates this risk.

E. Gracheva: Vladyka, according to Western sociologists, about 70 percent of people around the world have donated more money than usual to those in need this year on Catholic Christmas. And if we talk about our Orthodox people, did they make more active donations to those in need and to the Church in 2020?

Metropolitan Hilarion: I don't know the statistics, but I know that the pandemic situation has stirred up a lot of people. Human hearts have become more responsive to adversity. The way the Church has responded to the calamity that has befallen us all shows that there are a lot of people in the Church who are ready to donate to charity, and even sacrifice their health and their own lives in order to help people.

Suffice it to say that since the beginning of the pandemic, the Church has formed a group of priests who have received special training in order to visit people in the so-called "red zone". Not to mention the enormous amount of charitable and social work that the Church does: the presence of priests in hospitals, the opening of centers for pregnant and single mothers, and many other things that the Church does through the Synodal Department for Charity and Social Service, through the diocesan departments for Charity and Social service. Also, many parishes have their own charity programs aimed at helping the poor, those who suffer, those who have fallen victim to this terrible disease. Therefore, the Church was and will be with people. The Church will always help people in difficult situations.

E. Gracheva: Thank you very much, Vladyka, for answering our questions. I congratulate you on the upcoming Christmas.

Metropolitan Hilarion: Likewise, Catherine. I congratulate you and all our viewers alike on the occasion of the Nativity of Christ. I wish that this holiday will bring joy, peace and comfort to every family and heart. May the Incarnate God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who was born in Bethlehem, help us in this difficult time to overcome all the difficulties, challenges, illnesses and trialsthat fall to our lot. Happy Nativity of Christ!

In the second part of the program Metropolitan Hilarion answered the questions of the viewers received on ***the website*** *of the Church and the World.*

Question: There are many similarities between Scripture and ancient mythology. Explain the connection between religion and mythology. Did the Gospel authors borrow many key episodes from myths?

Metropolitan Hilarion: In this question, I think, the so-called "mythological theory" of the origin of Christianity is voiced. The essence of this theory, which was invented at the end of the XIX – beginning of the XX century, is that the Gospel is not an independent literary work, but a compilation created on the basis of ancient myths, including the Egyptian myth of Osiris and ancient Greek myths. This theory was popular, in particular, in the Third Reich, wh ere it was promoted by the scientist (if you can call him a scientist at all) Arthur Drews, and in the Soviet Union it was used in the 1920s-30s in atheist propaganda.

Any unbiased analysis of the gospel text shows that it has nothing to do with ancient mythology, because it is a text written by eyewitnesses of events or from the words of eyewitnesses of events. It describes the real historical figure of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, describes His miracles, teachings and words. Some may consider these descriptions more or less reliable, but this is a matter of taste. From the point of view of Christians, Holy Scripture is revealed, that is, we say that it was written by people, but by those who received help from above when they expounded these revealed truths. Therefore, we Christians do not question the historicity of Jesus Christ or the quality of the evidence on which the gospel narratives are based. We consider these testimonies to be authentic and reliable.

Question: I have always believed that the expression" for the glory of God "means to do something good without expecting or receiving a monetary reward for it, that is, expressions "for free" and "for the glory of God " are synonymous. However, recently there was an alternative opinion. Please explain whether the expression "for the glory of God" is related to money or not. And in general, in what cases is it appropriate to use it?

Metropolitan Hilarion: Of course, the phrase "for the glory of God" is not synonymous with the expression "free of charge". For example, any priest is called to perform his ministry for the glory of God, but this does not mean that a priest should not receive a salary. The Apostle Paul in his epistles recalls the ancient tradition that priests eat from the altar. Here we can recall the words of the Lord Jesus Christ: "Seek first the kingdom of God, and all these things will be added to you "(Mt 6.33). "All these things" in this case means material wealth. It would be best if every Christian lived by this very simple principle: to do everything for the glory of God, while receiving the material reward that he deserves, and not looking for more.

Question: Why is man God's favorite creation? After all, angels are much better. They do not sin, they pray carefully, they have no vices or passions, they sincerely love God, fulfill His will, and they never have the desire to violate this will.

Metropolitan Hilarion: If we talk about how the holy Fathers answer this question, we see paradoxical judgments. Some holy fathers remind us that man is superior to angels in his vocation and potential, because he was created in the image and likeness of God, and we do not know in what image and likeness angels were created.

We know that angels are ministering spirits, including those who are in the service not only of God, but also of people. Everyone has their own guardian angel. We also know that some of the angels fell away from God before the creation of mankind, resisting His will and violating His command.

Indeed, those angels who did not fall away, who remained faithful to God, are superior in their way of life to many people. But in terms of potential and vocation, man is superior to angels. This is confirmed by the example of the Most Holy Theotokos, who in the liturgical texts is called " More honorable than the Cherubim, and more glorious beyond compare than the Seraphim", that is, She, being a human being, immeasurably surpassed the angels in Her holiness: both cherubim and seraphim.

Question: In April and May, when there were fewer cases of Covid, the churches were closed. Why do churches continue to work now, when the number of infected people is growing at a huge pace? So many people are crammed inside that there is no place for an apple to fall. Are donations more expensive than the life and health of believers?

Metropolitan Hilarion: As you can see, we open churches not for donations, but for people. Just as hospitals do not exist to take money from people, but to treat them. You can, of course, close hospitals because of the pandemic, so that people who have various diseases do not get infected with the coronavirus. When the health authorities ordered the temples to be closed, we closed the temples. In that case, we listened to the recommendations and requirements of the sanitary authorities.

In those countries wh ere such requirements appear or persist, we also comply with these requirements. That is why our Orthodox churches are still closed in some countries. But wh ere the sanitary authorities do not require this, we will not close churches on our own initiative. Moreover, there are shopping centers, shops, cinemas, theaters, and concert halls. The metro transports people almost around the clock, including during rush hours. Therefore, there is no reason to close churches here. If

these grounds appear and the sanitary authorities tell us about it, we will respond accordingly.

I would like to conclude this transmission with the words from the Gospel of John about the Lord Jesus Christ as God Incarnate: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1.14).

I congratulate you all on the occasion of the Nativity of Christ.

Take care of yourself, take care of your loved ones, and may the Lord protect you all.

DECR Communication Service

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