Metropolitan Hilarion advises the faithful not to participate in baptismal bathing during the pandemic



The chairman of the Department of External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate the metropolitan of Volokolamsk Hilarion answered questions put to him by the presenter of The Church and the World programme Yekaterina Gracheva which was broadcast on 16th January 2021 on Rossia-24.

Yekaterina Gracheva: Hello. This is The Church and the World on Rossia-24 where we every week we will be putting questions to the chairman of the Department of External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate the metropolitan of Volokolamsk Hilarion. Hello, Your Eminence.

Metropolitan Hilarion: Hello, Yekaterina. Hello, dear brothers and sisters.

Gracheva: In a few days' time in the US Joe Biden will assume duties as the new president. Last week Donald Trump's supporters broke into Capitol Hill and, although Trump condemned the protestors, the social media networks and YouTube have blocked his accounts. What is your opinion on this curtailing of democracy, if that is what we can call it?

MH: I think that as soon as the person whom the American elites were not expecting to be elected was elected, it was then they started to trample all over Trump. Whole groups of experts gathered to hound Trump in every many possible. So, in this instance we can forget about any freedom of speech or conscience. From the outset Trump was blocked by the media. For the four years of his presidency he

tried to overcome this blockade, including through his account on Twitter, which thanks to him has become very popular.

Now, as his presidency is drawing to a close, when his opponents have in effect already assumed power, any attempts on Trump's part to appeal to people or any disagreement with the outcome of the election will be seen as a call to violence. Earlier the blame for everything was laid at his door and now even more so. I cannot exclude a situation whereby, once his powers as president of the USA are terminated, criminal proceedings will be instigated against him because I do not think that his opponents want him to continue acting within in the political arena in any way whatsoever.

Gracheva: Some are asserting that this is purely political censorship, but there are those who think that if the president, that is, the authorities, were to block social media accounts, then that would indeed be censorship, but in this instance the opposite is happening in that it is the owners of private institutions who are acting. In the same way as restaurants may close – we may let in customers or we may not let them in – then so too we can block accounts or not block them. Which of these opinions do you share? Is this censorship or not? Do you yourself use Twitter, Facebook or Instagram or perhaps you use Telegram? And what guided you in making your choice?

MH: I use various social media applications. I use WhatsApp for correspondence. A while ago I was told that this is the safest means of corresponding, whereas as now I am told that the opposite is true. Many of my friends have switched over to Telegram. I too will probably, under pressure from my social circle, have to switch to Telegram. As for Twitter, I started using it and then gave it up because the style of communication which this app offers doesn't suit me. The use of short sentences is what Donald Trump was very good at, but I'm not so good at it!

If we go back the situation that has arisen in the US, then I think that in this instance we are not dealing with censorship but with the hounding of a politician who from the very outset upset the interests of the US ruling elites who from the very beginning were unhappy with his rule and so throughout his presidency they criticized him and blocked his actions, and now want to block those means of communication that he had created for himself. And as in America there really is great dissatisfaction with what is happening and what has happened, and Trump has many supporters, among whom some are prepared to break the law, then all of this presents a threat to America's national security.

Gracheva: Mike Pompeo, summing up his work as US secretary of state, said the following: "We took action on lots of fronts with Russia, including religious freedom. I made sure the U.S. supported international recognition of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, helped the Metropolitan escape Russian influence." This is a quote. Can we really consider this an achievement on the part of this American politician?

MH: If we look at it from the point of view of American politics, then this is probably a great achievement, but we can hardly agree that this is an achievement if we look at it from the angle of the Orthodox Church. What are we in fact dealing with here? With the fact that American politicians are quite openly and shamelessly stating that they rule not only the political elites and leaders of other countries but also that they quite openly interfere in internal ecclesiastical politics.

Mr. Pompeo is not an Orthodox Christian. He occupies no position in the Orthodox Church but believes it quite within his rights to interfere in the affairs of the Orthodox Churches. He speaks of how he helped the 'Ukrainian metropolitan' escape Russian influence, which basically means that he supports the church schism. We may even say that this schism was prompted by the American government because the Americans have long hoped to weaken Russia, which if course means they want to weaken Orthodoxy. So, a political strategy was devised which would firstly alienate the Ukrainian Church from the Russian Church, and then alienate the Greek Orthodox Church from the Russian Orthodox Church. By and large this project has been a failure. If Mr. Pompeo believes this to be a diplomatic victory and wants to retire from politics with this victory, then that of course is a matter between him and his conscience.

Gracheva: On the Rossia TV channel there was recently shown the premier of the film on Vladimir Putin's visit to Syria. In an interview he thanks Islamic representatives for the way they have defended Christian holy sites in Syria. You have visited Damascus many times. Why, when war is raging in this land, has it been possible to retain mutual respect between religions? What is the reason and whom to we have to thank for this?

MH: I should first of all state that for many centuries Christians and Muslims have lived side by side in Syria. In the film you mentioned one Syrian scholar spoke in a very interesting way of how the Umayyad Mosque – the Great Mosque of Damascus – came into being. It was built alongside an Orthodox church. The mosque and the church shared a common courtyard and gates. Christians would enter by these gates and go to their church, while Muslims would enter by the same gates and go to their mosque. This was the situation for seventy years. Then, of course, the church ceased to exist on this site, but there did remain the holy relics of St. John the Baptist, who is venerated in both Christianity and Islam as a prophet.

For centuries, in spite of the many political complexities, Christians continued to live on Syrian land. Right up until the time when terrorists started to seize Syrian territories one after another, Christians and Muslims lived in peace and accord with each other. However, of course, the advance of terrorists created a serious disbalance in this relationship that had formed over many centuries because, firstly, the terrorists mercilessly killed Christians and drove them from their homes and, secondly, unfortunately,

some local inhabitants among the Muslim population either directly or indirectly to a great degree took part in this and eradicated the trust of Christians towards their Muslim neighbours. At least in some areas. I was told about this in Syria when I visited the country. So, in order to restore now trust, great efforts are called for. And so that Christians can return to their homes and again live in peace and accord with their Muslim brothers and sisters, we need not only a plan for the restoration of homes and dwelling places, for ruined churches, monasteries, mosques and other religious temples, but also a plan aimed at restoring trust between Muslims and Christians.

Gracheva: Your Eminence, a few days ago there was the thirtieth anniversary of the intervention of Soviet troops in Lithuania. The TV station in Vilnius was stormed, fifteen people died and many more wounded. You were there at the time and went on television in Kaunas and appealed to the troops: “If you receive orders to fire upon unarmed people, to crush them with tanks, disobey these orders, fire into the air, do not fire at all, do all that you can, only do not spill innocent blood.” Why did you then decide to interfere in political events?

MH: Now, thirty years later, I see this a little differently than I saw it then. We then saw bloodshed in Vilnius, there were casualties, there was a young girl who was crushed to death by tanks and the Lithuanian people were horrified. The TV tower in Vilnius was seized and Soviet propaganda was spread from there. Everyone was saying that the next step would be to seize the TV tower in Kaunas, where I was rector of a parish. Moreover, I would practically every week visited the military barracks in and around Kaunas. I spoke personally to many of the soldiers and officers. I realized that if our soldiers were to take up arms and murder innocent civilians, then it would lead to a genuine catastrophe.

That’s why it was not a case of interfering in the political situation or a political conflict, but a case of saving lives. That is why I appealed to our military to disobey orders if they were to ordered to fire upon innocent civilians.

Gracheva: Your Eminence, this year there were far less parishioners at Christmas services than in previous years. The mayor of Moscow quoted these figures: there were 140 thousand Orthodox Christians in churches, compared to a million last year. And now we are about to celebrate the feast of Theophany. Will holy water be distributed as usual? What will the feast be like this year? What about bathing in holes in the ice on rivers and lakes? What advice would you like to give to the faithful?

MH: Holy water blessed at Theophany will be distributed as usual in churches, but I hope that at the same time people will observe the hygiene regulations, including social distancing, and that people will await their turn wearing masks. I don’t think there will be too many who will want to plunge through the ice this year. This is not the time to test out our bodies in this manner!

Incidentally, in previous years I have also stated that plunging oneself through the ice is not a church rite or requirement; people do this purely on their own initiative. But in the present situation when there is a virus about and many peoples' bodies have been weakened by having endured this illness, I would not advise any Orthodox believers to plunge through the ice.

Gracheva: Thank you, Your Eminence, for answering our questions.

MH: Thank you, Yekaterina.

In the second part of the programme metropolitan Hilarion answered viewers' questions that were put to him via the The Church and the World website.

Question: What would be the reason for not introducing in kindergartens lessons acquainting children with the Bible? How can this issue be resolved?

MH: Regarding kindergartens, then at least from the legal perspective there is nothing to prevent the introduction of such a subject. I have a lawyer's documentation stating that the state laws on education of 2014 allow for the introduction of such subjects as 'modules of religious culture' within basic curriculums for pre-school education.

Our Church has a department for religious education and catechism headed by the metropolitan of Yekaterinburg Eugene. The department has drawn up recommendations for the teaching of religious education or disciplines linked to the bible study at the pre-school level. The department has also drawn up recommendations for the teaching of the corresponding modules in schools. In this regard there are certain restrictions, including those imposed by legislation. In some schools the foundations of Orthodox culture or the foundations other religious traditions are taught. In some schools the foundations of the religious culture of the peoples of Russia are taught. These are modules within which it would also be possible to study the Bible.

Of course, from the Church's perspective, this is not enough as both the Old and New Testament scriptures, as well as one's own religious tradition, can be studied at both pre-school institutions and at school throughout the entire study period there. This in no way should be hindered by the secular nature of education. Moreover, as I have said before on our programme, I believe that the Bible, and in particular the gospels, should be studied not simply as a monument of religious literature but also in general as a literary monument. The gospels, for example, could be studied as part of the course on literature. Why are the Epic of Gilgamesh or the Tale of Igor's Campaign studied in school but the gospels are not?

There are cases where we are confronted by the following picture whereby the teaching of particular disciplines on religion is hindered by the directors of pre-school institutions or schools with reference to laws or simply with reference to the secular nature of education. This hindrance, based on personal preference, is very difficult to overcome.

In recently times there have been set up many Orthodox schools, gymnasia and kindergartens where children are taught religious disciplines unhindered. If you want to place your children in one such kindergarten or school, then I believe you would have made the correct choice.

Question: My godfather and his son, to whom I am godparent, left for Israel to live there permanently. A number of years lapsed and I found out that they have started to attend the synagogue. Does that mean that I no longer have a godson or godfather? If my godson and godfather have changed religions, what does this mean?

MH: I believe that you still have both a godfather and godson who have apparently, if it is true what you say, renounced Christianity. But for you as a Christian there can be no such thing as a 'former Christian.' You can still continue to pray for these people – for both your godfather and godson – that they return to Christ because Christianity is about faith in Christ as God and Saviour. Judaism does not recognize this faith and rejects it.

Question: The Lord wants us to turn to him of our own free will. Can he call a person without his will? Are there such testimonies? Is there hope that a mother can beseech the Maker to save the soul of her son without his will?

MH: On the one hand, there is a widespread saying that without his will God cannot save a human being. On the other hand, we know from history of many instances in which God decisively intervenes in human life when we least expect it. Perhaps the best-known example is the conversation of Saul who was a persecutor of the Christian Church, but to whom Christ appeared on the road to Damascus, who was blinded by a divine light and after which almost instantly was transformed from being a persecutor of the Church to being her most zealous apostle.

Some times God intervenes in a person's life and turns it completely upside down, while this intervention may not be so clear and obvious. Sometimes God intervenes in a person's life through other circumstances, for example, through grave illness which we might suffer from and which helps us to review completely our direction in life, transform us from being a non-believer to a believer.

That's why there are such instances of God intervening in human life. And a mother's prayer can do much to save her son or daughter if they believe prayer to be ineffectual. God listens to a mother's

prayer. Again, we know from history of many instances when non-believing children were saved by God through a mother’s prayer.

I would like to conclude our programme with words from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles: “Believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, you and your household” (Acts 16.31).

I wish you all good things. Look after yourself, look after those close to you and may the Lord preserve you all.

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