Metropolitan Hilarion: For the Patriarch the prayerful support of the whole Church is important

On 21st November 2020 on the The Church and The World *TV programme which comes out on* Rossia-24 *on Saturdays and Sundays, the chairman of the Department of External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate the metropolitan of Volokolamsk Hilarion answered questions put by the channel's presenter Yekaterina Gracheva.*

Gracheva: Hello. This the *The Church and The World* TV programme on Rossia-24 where we will put putting questions to the chairman of the Department of External Church Relations the metropolitan of Volokolamsk Hilarion. Hello, Your Eminence.

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

We have received news from Belgrade that in his 91st year the Patriarch of Serbia Irinej has died from the coronavirus infection. He was in good health and, if it was not for the coronavirus, he most likely would have lived to be a hundred. His indefatigability surprised his aides who were much younger than he was.

We in the Russian Orthodox Church will always remember in our prayers His Holiness Patriarch Irinej, more so as he unambiguously and clearly supported canonical Orthodoxy in Ukraine. He was many times a guest of the Russian Orthodox Church, he visited Moscow, Kiev, St. Petersburg and Minsk. We also often visited him, and the relationship between us was one of remarkable trust. There was a very warm relationship between him and His Holiness Patriarch Kirill. We will pray for Patriarch Irinej, we will give thanks to God for the life he led. In this programme I would like to express condolences on behalf of both His Holiness Patriarch Kirill and myself personally, and on behalf of the faithful of the Russian Orthodox Church to all the faithful of the Serbian Orthodox Church which has endured this sad loss.

And now let us turn to other news.

Gracheva: Your Eminence, in one of our recent programmes we spoke of how many immigrants in Europe, by which we mean Muslims, live not according to the law of a particular country but according to Shariah law. There have appeared very curious figures, I think: the results of an opinion poll taken in France show that more than fifty percent of young Muslims living in France put Shariah law on a higher level than local laws. Do these figures surprise you?

Metropolitan Hilarion: I am not surprised by these figures because I have visited Europe many times, I lived in Europe for a number of years and know the processes that are at work there. I believe that these processes are in many ways connected to the immigration policy which has been and remains in place for many years in most European countries and which ignores the religious allegiance of people who have arrived on the European continent. I think that this is a huge omission.

I know Hungary very well, there immigration policy differs from that of the majority of EU countries. Hungary has refused to take in the quota of migrants which was imposed upon the country by the EU leadership. In Hungary immigration happens on a very selective basis: each individual's past is looked into, as well as his views and also his religious allegiance.

The conscious rejection of Christian values which we see in most EU countries has led to countries unthinkingly accepting people who even more so have no intention being integrated into the society of a particular country. And in general, I would like to state that a non-religious society is not the best environment into which a religious person can integrate. It would be far better if the rights of all religious traditions were respected so that freedom of religion exists for all without exceptions, so that people can take advantage of the opportunity of being a religious person in the society which he joins, while at the same time the state sees to it that religious traditions coexist peacefully.

I believe that Russia here can offer a good example. In Russia for many centuries there have coexisted Christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists and people of other religious traditions, and we all live in peace and harmony. State policy is aimed at ensuring that inter-religious contradictions do not become any worse, at smoothing them over, and at the same time at ensuring that people of all religious traditions feel themselves at home and not as guests.

Gracheva: Your Eminence, there was a case in Sweden recently whereby a schoolboy during a photo session was pressured by the photographer to remove his cross. The photographer said that this religious symbol on his breast may cause offence to the other pupils. The boy's father was indignant and said that if in Sweden someone was asked to remove their hijab or the star of David, there would be a public outcry, while to do the same regarding a Christian symbol causes no reaction. Do you think this criticism is justified?

Metropolitan Hilarion: I think this criticism is justified and it can be applied, unfortunately, not only to the leadership of Sweden. For many years the heads of European countries have been combatting Islamophobia and antisemitism but have forgotten that for a long time now in Europe there is such a thing as Christianophobia, and this passing over in silence of the Christian tradition and the ignoring of Christian symbols is what EU citizens constantly run up against. I think that the case in Sweden is not a solitary instance but has become almost the dominant trend in modern-day Europe, that is, Europe is

consciously rejecting its own Christian roots, Europe is passing over in silence its Christian past and present, and Christians in Europe are already beginning to think of themselves as a discriminated against minority, whereas they remain the majority.

There was a very eloquent example of this when at the beginning of the 2000s they started to draft the European Constitution. It came to nothing, but the draft of the Constitution was published. It stated that Europe is the inheritor of the Greco-Roman tradition, but not a single word was said of Christianity. This of course caused great indignation among all of Europe's Christians because Christianity is an integral part of the European identity. It is enough to visit any Europe city and look at the architecture and see how many Christian churches there are in this city to realize what importance Christian had in the past and continues to have for the European continent.

So, when we hear that crucifixes are removed from school classrooms and assembly halls, that schoolchildren are forced to remove their crosses in order not to shock Muslims (although why would they be shocked at a Christian wearing a cross?), all of this evokes within my memory recollections of our comparatively recent past when teachers tore crosses off schoolchildren at a time when atheist ideology and atheist propaganda dominated Russia. I hope very much that Europe does not go as far as this and repeat those same mistakes which we in Russia paid for so dearly.

Gracheva: Your Eminence, not so long ago the Russian Orthodox Church presented its design for the new church for Moscow State University which will accommodate a thousand people and the height of which will be forty-six meters. It's no secret that there has been plenty of criticism of this church: some compare it to the Hogwarts school in the Harry Potter books, saying that a church on the territory of an higher educational establishment is not necessary at all, that there is the Church of St. Tatiana on Mokhovaya St. (the original university church), and so why build a second church for MSU students when in Moscow there is still a large number of churches awaited restoration. Do you think that is quite fair criticism or not?

Metropolitan Hilarion: It is my opinion that this criticism is quite unfair because, firstly, the campus of Moscow State University is scattered around various parts of our capital city, and the university church on Mokhovaya St. is a long way from Vernadsky Avenue where most of the student contingent is to be found. So, there is nothing unusual in MGU, where tens of thousands of students study and who are scattered all around Moscow, having more than one church building.

I studied at Oxford University. If you go to Oxford and ask where the university is, then you will find that it is located everywhere because it comprises a confederation of approximately forty or so colleges and each one of them has one or more church, that is, Oxford University by my calculation has at least one hundred churches which serve as university chapels. But MSU will have not one hundred, or forty, but

two churches. I don't think this is too many for such a huge university.

If we are to speak of why a church is needed on the territory of the university, then I think my reply is quite evident. Among the students of MSU there are many Orthodox believers and this church is being built for them. It is being built not for Muslims, not for those who belong to other religious traditions, not for atheists, not for those who want to pray to the 'spaghetti monster' as some students have written, but for Orthodox believers who comprise a large number at MSU. I believe that it is quite right that Orthodox students should have their own church on the territory of the university.

Gracheva: Your Eminence, this Friday on 20th November His Holiness Kirill Patriarch of Moscow and All Rus will be seventy-four years old. Is it at all acceptable to say how old the Patriarch is? How did you congratulate him? How does the Patriarch prefer to spend this day? Many people will find this interesting.

Metropolitan Hilarion: Under normal circumstances the celebration of the Patriarch's birthday begins with the Divine Liturgy which he heads in the Christ the Saviour Church with other bishops concelebrating. Then at the end of the Liturgy the senior concelebrating bishop congratulates him, and then there is a celebratory meal. But in the present circumstances all of this has been impossible because of the pandemic. So, the Patriarch prayed in his domestic chapel in the small monastery where he permanently lives, while each of us prayed in our own churches or others simply at home. Some of us were able to congratulate His Holiness the Patriarch by telephone.

His Holiness always reminds people that the prayerful support of the whole Church is very important to him. I have many times accompanied him on trips, and every time when he meets the faithful, he says: Pray for the Patriarch, I feel this support. I hope that on this day too, in spite of the unusual circumstances, His Holiness the Patriarch felt the support of the whole Church thanks to the prayers that were lifted up for him in both the churches of Russia and in churches of other countries of the canonical territory of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Gracheva: On behalf of Rossia-24 TV channel I can only add my voice to these congratulations and wish His Holiness many and good years. Thank you, Your Eminence, for answering our questions.

Metropolitan Hilarion: Thank you, Yekaterina.

In the second half of the programme metropolitan Hilarion answered questions put to him by viewers through the The Church and The World *website.*

Question: Why is suicide considered to be a sin if a person seeks the solution to his problems and does

not want to suffer? Why should people on earth endure suffering? To what purpose?

Metropolitan Hilarion: Suicide is a sin because in resorting to it, it is impossible to solve our problems, while at the same time it may create new problems for oneself. We believe that human life continues after death. We are given life on earth so that we may here, on earth, solve our problems and the most important problem for a human person is the relationship he has with God.

If we live with God, we can never think of ourselves as the owners of our own lives. We know that God has determined for us the day when we are born and the die when we die, and that every day is given to us so that we can fulfill the will of God. We think about this and strive towards this, while problems that arise we solve in the light of this religious perception of the world. This is why none of these problems ever finds its solution in suicide.

If someone finds it impossible to cope with life's problems and situations, if he does not place his hope in God but only in himself or herself, if God is not present in this person's life, then there may arise a situation when he or she will say: why should I suffer, why should I solve my problems? Would it not simply be easier to kill myself? Yet the life of a person continues. If he or she suffered here and found no solution to his or her inner problems, then this suffering will continue there, and in the case of suicide these problems will of course not merely continue but will be become ever more burdensome because the person has committed a sin of which he or she can no longer repent.

The question of why people on earth ought to endure suffering and to what purpose they suffer is a question which has vexed philosophical minds for many centuries, and no single philosopher has yet to answer this question. Christianity has its own answer to this question and it is this: suffering is a school that we go through. Suffering, if we accept it with true Christian humility, with hope in the will of God, is a means of cleansing the human soul. Moreover, we are not alone in suffering because God himself too suffers alongside us. When God died on the cross, this was when God's solidarity with suffering humankind was made manifest to the highest degree. When we suffer, God is alongside us and with us. So, we are not alone, we should never fall into despair, but we are called to endure suffering as something that God has permitted so that we may be purified and so that we ascend to a higher degree of spiritual perfection and the spiritual life.

Question: Is it OK to change a child's name from that of a Muslim one to a Christian one if at birth the father named his son in honour of the prophet Mohammed? My son is fourteen years old and he is not baptized.

Metropolitan Hilarion: I think that if your son is not baptized, then it would be wrong to change his name, but if you decide to bring him up in the Orthodox faith, then every person at baptism when he is

baptized is given a new name also. But to which faith to belong depends upon you or your child.

Question: I have a question for you regarding alcohol at funerals. I think that it is quite wrong when people drink and nobody understands that they have come to remember the departed. Could you please say how the Church looks upon all this? Explain to me please, as an Orthodox Christian, where this tradition came from?

Metropolitan Hilarion: This tradition is in fact very old, but the way you describe it, we are not dealing with a tradition but rather a distortion of a tradition. This is what would happen in the early Church. When people lost somebody close to them, when a martyr or a Christian died, then people would gather for a meal which was both commemorative and eucharistic. That which we know today as the Divine Liturgy, the Church's main service, originally existed in the form of a meal, that is, people sat at the table, ate food together, Scripture was read aloud and towards the end there was the breaking of bread, that is a eucharist (thanksgiving). Gradually the eucharist evolved into solemn worship, while the meal remained as a common meal for Christians, as well as a commemorative meal. Of course, a commemorative meal, even when alcohol is available at it, should never degenerate into a banal drinking session. In this instance alcohol is to be drunk in moderation and really only for the purpose of recalling the deceased.

It should also be remembered that the person who has departed for the other world is in need not so much of abundant libations in his memory as our prayers. That is why in the Church there are traditions and rules regarding the commemoration of the dead. We commemorate the deceased every day for a period of forty days after his death, and then we continue to commemorate them either every day, or if not every day, then at least on those days instituted by the Church for the commemoration of the dead and on days connected with their memory, for example, on the anniversary of their death.

Question: Could you please tell me how I should receive communion if I am categorically against the use of alcohol?

Metropolitan Hilarion: At communion one usually receives a small amount of alcohol. This is the blood of Christ which has the physical properties of wine. But if for some reason you cannot take alcohol at all, you should approach your local priest, speak to him about this and come to some arrangement on how he can give you communion. In exceptional cases it is permissible to give communion under one species, that is, for example, only through the body of Christ or only through the blood of Christ. For example, infants who are unable to chew solid food are given communion only with the blood of Christ.

I would like to conclude our programme with the words of the apostle Paul from his epistle to the Ephesians: "We are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life" (Eph 2.10).

I wish you all that is good. Take care of yourselves, take care of those close to you, and may the Lord preserve all of us.

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