Metropolitan Hilarion Views as Important the Renewal of Consultations between Religious Leaders of Russia, Azerbaijan and Armenia on the Issue of Regulating the Conflict in Karabakh

On 14th 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. We will put putting questions on important events in Russia and the world 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.

Gracheva: Undoubtedly, the most important political news of the week is that an agreement has been reached between Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan on a ceasefire in Nagorny Karabakh. The peace-keeping contingent provided for in the peace resolution presupposes that on a regular basis two thousand soldiers from Russia will be located in the conflict zone. The agreement has been viewed ambiguously in Armenia and has already led to a power crisis. Those who protest against it have called the Armenian prime minister Nikola Pashinian a traitor to the Armenian people. Margarita Simonyan, in reaction to these events and speaking of Russia's role in the negotiation process, has written on social media the following: "Military action in Nagorny Karabakh has ceased. Thank you, Mother Russia. As always. Any Armenian who dares to criticize Russia ought to cut off their dirty tongue. Citizens of Armenia can criticize only themselves." Your Eminence, how do you evaluate the role of Russia in the peace agreement that has been achieved?

Metropolitan Hilarion: First of all, I would like to say that the restoration of peace in Nagorny Karabakh is an undoubted political achievement and great foreign policy victory for the Russian state and personally for president Putin, in spite of the fact that not all sides are equally happy with it. The most important thing was to stop the bloodshed and save peoples' lives. And that has now been achieved.

Secondly, I would like to remind people that throughout the time this conflict has lasted (and it has been going on for thirty years now), religious leaders have voiced the opinion that the conflict should be

directed towards a peaceful resolution. There has been and remains a mechanism of tripartite negotiations whereby the Armenian patriarch, the head of the spiritual directorate of Muslims in the Caucasus and the Patriarch of Moscow and All Rus get together, discuss the relevant issues and make the relevant decisions. I believe that the time has come to return to this format because the countries must heal their wounds and this is the right time when the voice of religious leaders must be heard.

It is very important at the present that religious leaders call not for the continuation of the conflict but that they call for peace and accord. It is quite natural that each religious leader is a citizen of his country and as a citizen of his country he will be in sympathy both with the authorities and the army, but at the same time it is equally important that the voice of religious leaders be an appeal to peace. For thirty years we have heard this from the Armenian patriarch and from the head of the spiritual directorate of the Muslims of the Caucasus.

I hope very much that religious leaders, through the mediation of the Moscow Patriarchate, will be able to make their contribution to a peaceful resolution of the situation and the establishment of a lasting peace not only in the land of Nagorny Karabakh but also in the two countries between which there exists a conflict and disputed territory.

Gracheva: Your Eminence, does the Russian Orthodox Church participate in negotiations on the fate of church buildings and other Christian holy sites on territories that have gone over to Azerbaijan?

Metropolitan Hilarion: The tripartite format of which I spoke has not yet been fully restored after the conflict got worse. However, I very much hope that in the near future negotiations will be renewed between the religious leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan through the mediation of the Moscow Patriarchate; then it will be possible to decide, amongst other things, issues linked to the restoration and normal functioning of objects on the territory of both countries.

Gracheva: Your Eminence, the presidential election in the United States of America is coming to a close. It has been a long-running soap opera which we've all been following with great interest. As a result, Joe Biden has won out over Trump in this battle. I know that you are personally acquainted with Mr. Biden, that you have met, and that there are photos of your meeting with him on the internet. I would like to know what personal, human impression did Joe Biden make on you, and what impression did he make as a Christian? What is the story behind him being denied communion in the Catholic Church?

Metropolitan Hilarion: I met with him in 2011 during his visit to Russia when he was still the vice-president of the USA. He met with the then Russian president Dmitry Medvedev as part of an official visit. At the US embassy at an event organized by the US ambassador I had a short meeting with Mr. Biden. The meeting left on the whole a favourable impression on me. I used the opportunity to tell him

about the inter-religious cooperation which happens in Russia and on inter-Christian dialogue, and he even invited me to America to continue the conversation.

Regarding Mr. Biden's religious allegiance, I believe that it is very important that his stance as a citizen corresponds to the stance of the religion to which he belongs. We know what the Catholic Church teaches regarding the value of human life, regarding abortion and regarding sex-change operations. Mr. Biden has often expressed views that do not correspond to this teaching. I would like to hope that, now that he has become president, he will act according to the teaching of the religion to which he belongs, that he will come to the defence of human life, that he will not publicly support abortion and that he will re-examine his stance regarding sex-change operations.

I personally believe and have repeatedly stated in our programme that sex-change operations are a falsehood as there is no genuine change of sex, there is only the external alteration of certain secondary sexual characteristics, that is, someone can acquire the external appearance of a representative of the opposite sex, but in reality he or she remains a representative of his or her own original sex. Little is said about this, and in the West it is mostly past over in silence as there is a whole industry for transgender operations. Psychologists and surgeons have a vested interest in this as they make huge money from it. Many in the West are afraid to state directly what in reality all of this is or simply are unable to do so. I hope very much that the new US president will take a stance which is in accordance with that of the Catholic Church, of which he is member.

Gracheva: Your Eminence, American new agencies have carried a story that seems rather odd to me. A school administration forbad a schoolgirl to wear an anti-coronavirus mask with 'Jesus Loves Me' written on it, while at the same time in the same school pupils are wearing masks defending the rights of people of colour with Black Lives Matter written on them. We should say that the presidential election campaign took place against the background of the Black Lives Matter protests which, as many experts have ascertained, in many ways determined the outcome of the election. It will be now interesting to see whose interests Joe Biden will defend, on whose side he will be on – whether he will come to the defence, for example, of those schoolchildren who have been denied their right to express their love for Christ.

Metropolitan Hilarion: The new president of the USA will in the first instance have to contend with the challenge of the coronavirus pandemic. Unfortunately, the current US administration's reaction has been less than adequate. We have heard from president Trump repeated promises that the pandemic will soon be defeated while the pandemic in fact continues apace. There are in America more than ten million people infected, while nearly a quarter of a million have died from the virus. These are very high and frightening statistics. I believe that president Biden will have to mobilize the entire US health system in order to develop a vaccine, to inoculate as many people as possible with this vaccine and halt the

spread of the virus.

Regarding the ideological set up which exists in contemporary America, then it would be better for Americans to discuss this than for us who live and observe it all from a distance. But I believe that everyone who belongs to a particular religion has the right to express publicly his or her opinion and stance if it does not violate the rights of other people and if it isn't aggressive. I believe that anyone who belongs to a Christian denomination should enjoy the right to wear clothing with whatever inscriptions. This is not something that should be subjected to control.

Gracheva: Your Eminence, we usually end our programme by discusses the coronavirus. The head of the UK armed forces Nick Carter in an interview with Sky News warned of the global risks as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. This is what he believes the risks are linked to and I quote: "Economic crises in the past have led to security crises which in turn spilled over into world wars." General Carter does not exclude the possibility of a new world war. Your Eminence, do you think such concerns are justified? Will we see a new world war?

Metropolitan Hilarion: The danger of a new world war exists, we felt it even before the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic. I don't think that the coronavirus pandemic has added any new dimensions to the international political scene in which today we can observe a polarization between certain centres of power and influence. Polarization can always be seen as dangerous as the world in which we live is a powder keg and all it takes is one fuse for the keg to explode. And the amount of weapons, including nuclear ones, is such that it would only take a small part of them to destroy life on the planet. I believe that a great responsibility rests on the leaders of those super powers which have nuclear weapons.

Of course, in spite of the current political disagreements, it is important to come to some arrangement and dialogue between each other should not be done through the language of sanctions, threats or blackmail but precisely through the language of dialogue. We have to learn how to respect various approaches while remembering that we all live in the same world, that this is the only world we have and that we are all responsible for maintaining peace on earth.

Ye. Gracheva: Thank you, Your Eminence. I look forward to meeting you next week.

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 World *website.*

Question: Are there any prayers that a believer can recite during the pandemic? People more than ever

are in need of the Lord God's help.

Metropolitan Hilarion: The main prayer is today read in churches at the Divine Liturgy and is recited by the priest. It has been published and its text was confirmed by the Holy Synod, and at every Divine Liturgy we lift this prayer up to God. You can read this prayer at home, and you can also pray in your own words for yourself, for those close to you, for our country, for the city or town in which we live and for the whole world because today we are all in need of God's aid.

Moreover, in prayer we call upon the Most Holy Mother of God, we ask her to protect us from all evil by her precious veil. We turn towards our beloved saints. One of the saints who has repeatedly appeared to believers, in particular in Greece and in Bulgaria, is a twentieth-century Greek saint called the Venerable Nicephorus the Leper and many people today pray to him. In the church on Bolshaya Ordynka St. street named after the icon of the Mother of God called the 'Joy of All Afflicted' – the church where I serve – we have a particle of the relics of this saint, and we pray to him for the cessation of the coronavirus pandemic.

Question: "Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will be all yours'" (Lk 4. 5-7). Does this mean that the world is controlled by the devil and that the kingdom of heaven is controlled by God?

Metropolitan Hilarion: It means that the devil is a deceiver. In no way does he control the world. The world is controlled by God. God is the lord of the heavens and the earth, while the devil is the one who pretends to be a lord, who enjoys only illusory power yet passes it off as real and thereby deceives people. When the devil appears to people to tempt them, he never says 'I am the devil, I am the bearer of evil'. He always passes himself off as the bearer of good, and this is what his strength and weakness consist of simultaneously. An illusory strength, yet if people in any way are attracted by it, they can become subject to it; and the weakness is in that if people know who the devil is and know by which methods he operates, then they have no difficulty in withstanding the temptations of the devil.

The gospels speak of how Jesus Christ resisted the temptations of the devil, and it is a story of how we should all remind ourselves how to relate to the temptations of the devil. If you want to know more about this story, you can read the commentaries of the holy fathers on the gospels of St. Matthew and St. Luke where it is told, and you can also read the remarkable work of our Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky *The Brothers Karamazov*. One of the chapters is entitled 'The Grand Inquisitor' which contains a profound philosophical analysis of the three temptations which the devil uses against Jesus Christ and which he uses to tempt any person. I hope that this reading will help you to understand better the meaning of this story and to understand better who the devil is, why he lays claim to a certain power

over peoples' minds or even over the kingdoms of the world and how to resist him.

Question: I watched a video clip on your YouTube channel and the thought entered my head that you are saying that Jesus was God on earth in the form of a human being, he became tired, he felt pain and so on, but he was without sin. When God created the human person and henceforth he knew that there would be many people, did he reward us with sin or did he punish us? If he rewarded us, then for what purpose? So that we be tormented and struggle with it all our lives? And if he punished us, then what for?

Metropolitan Hilarion: The Orthodox Church teaches that God is not the author of either evil or sin. Evil and sin were brought into our lives through the free will of human beings. God created us as free. We are not puppets in a theatre which unthinkingly and unwillingly fulfill another's will, even the will of God. God has placed us in a situation whereby at every concrete moment of our lives we have the chance to fulfill his will or our own will. Our own human will may coincide with his will but it also may be opposed to his will if, for example, we fall for the devil's temptations.

And the question of the meaning of sin, I believe, should be asked by every person not in an abstract philosophical way or in relation to other people, but in relation to oneself. You have a particular moment in your life when you can do good or not do it, you can do evil or not do it. And every time you stand at a crossroads: nobody will ever force you to do sinful or evil acts, no one has that power over your soul. You make your own choice, so it is wrong to speak in terms of whether God has punished or rewarded you with sin. God has granted us the right to life, he has endowed us with free will. God has granted us the opportunity to choose always between good and evil. We can see by the example of many saints and simply virtuous people that through the course of their lives they were consistent in their choice in favour of the good. I very much wish that you be equally consistent in this choice and fulfill the will of God.

I would like to conclude today's programme with the words of the apostle Paul from the epistle to the Romans: "Do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions" (Rm 6.12).

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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