Metropolitan Hilarion: The Russian Church does not consider to change the calendar and the date of Pascha



On April 3rd, 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, Ekaterina! Hello, dear brothers and sisters!

E. Gracheva: The representative of the Patriarchate of Constantinople to the World Council of Churches, Archbishop Job of Telmis, called for changing the rules for calculating the date of Easter so that the Orthodox calendar would coincide with the Catholic one, and our Easter would fall on one day each year. As you know, this does not happen every year. What do you think of this suggestion?

Metropolitan Hilarion: It has probably been discussed for several decades in various contexts, including at the World Council of Churches. But here the question is very simple: who should change their date of Easter? For example, we are not going to change our Easter calendar.

The background of this question is very old, it goes back to the first centuries of Christianity. If you read the books of ancient historians, it is clear fr om them that in the original Christian Church there was no single date for celebrating Easter. At the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 325, this issue was resolved, and it was established that Easter would be celebrated on the first Sunday after the vernal equinox. This system of calculation is still preserved in the Orthodox Church.

In the Orthodox Church, there are no internal impulses that would come fr om our Church people to replace the Church calendar – this applies not only to the date of Easter celebration, but also to the so-called transition to the new calendar. From time to time, there are voices in favor of bringing our Church calendar in line with the secular calendar. Such an attempt was even made in the Russian Church in the 1920s, when Patriarch Tikhon issued an order to switch to the new style, and two weeks later it had to be cancelled because the church people did not accept this. Accordingly, the issue of changing the calendar is not currently on the agenda of the Orthodox Church – in any case, it is not on the agenda of the Russian Orthodox Church.

E. Gracheva: Orthodox Christians are now fasting in the Great Lent, at least according to the Church canons they should do so. Interesting statistics: Russians who consider themselves Orthodox do not connect their religious affiliation with whether to observe the fast or not. Of Russians who consider themselves Orthodox, only 13 percent are ready to observe the restrictions of fasting this year, according to the Russian Public Opinion Research Center. At the same time, two thirds of citizens (both those who are in the Church and those who are far from church rituals) will not observe fasting restrictions - this is the answer of 63 percent of Orthodox Christians and 69 percent of all respondents. Every second person learned about the Great Lent from the media or from the Internet. In my opinion, these figures are not encouraging. Or, perhaps, you look at them differently?

Metropolitan Hilarion: I look at them differently, because if you take these figures not as a percentage, but in absolute terms, then we are talking about the fact that several million Russians observe Lent – in my opinion, this is a very significant indicator.

I would like to emphasize that we never make fasting a prerequisite for belonging to the Orthodox Church. We are talking about the fact that the Orthodox Church has regulations aimed primarily at the spiritual and physical health of people, including rules concerning fasting. Once in Switzerland, I was talking to a doctor who was interested in my health and asked: how do you manage to keep so fit? Maybe you follow some special diet? I said what kind of "diet" I follow – this is, in fact, the "diet" that is prescribed by the Orthodox Church: during the week on Wednesdays and Fridays we do not eat certain types of food and explained to him what this food is. Plus, we have four long fasts, and Great Lent is particularly strict. He said: I would recommend that all my patients follow this diet. That is, even

from a purely dietary point of view, it is useful to fast, but we always emphasize that fasting in the Church is established not for reasons of diet or physical health, but primarily as an auxiliary tool on the spiritual path of a person. In this sense, we consider it as an auxiliary tool.

For example, some people cannot fast for health reasons: the elderly, pregnant women, and infants do not fast. We do not make fasting a prerequisite for being a member of the Orthodox Church. So I think these are good numbers. If we were taking statistics from 30 years ago, there would be no 13 percent, 10 percent, 5 percent, or even 3 percent of fasting people, but now they are. I think that this percentage will slowly grow, but the Church as a whole never chases after numbers. We are interested in each individual person, their spiritual and physical health, and we take care of it and will continue to care. At the same time, we will not impose any fasting rules on anyone.

E. Gracheva: Among my friends every year there are more and more people who do not consider themselves religious, many of them are generally Agnostic, but it is during Lent that they observe fasting restrictions and some fast even more strictly than Orthodox people. Do you generally welcome this?

Metropolitan Hilarion: Fasting itself, if it is not associated with any religious practice, can have a positive effect on the human body. A healthy lifestyle is now becoming more and more fashionable, and this can only be welcomed. A healthy lifestyle, among other things, involves abstaining from certain types of food at certain times. It assumes that a person monitors their weight, appearance, fitness, monitors how many calories they consume and how much they spend. I think this is one of the reasons that the practice of fasting is becoming more and more popular, But once again, I would like to say that in the Orthodox Church, fasting is perceived as an auxiliary tool. If a person simply observes fasts solely for health reasons, and at the same time does not go to church, and even does not believe in God, then, of course, fasting will not have any result for him, except for physical improvement.

E. Gracheva: The Inter-Council Presence of the Russian Orthodox Church has a website wh ere documents are published from time to time. My attention has been drawn to the draft document "Ethical issues related to the method of in vitro fertilization" (IVF). It turns out that now the Russian Orthodox Church allows the possibility of IVF if possible conditions are met – this is a revolution. This document that appeared unnoticed on the site means a lot to couples who are desperate to naturally conceive a child. Please tell us in more detail what these parents can now receive the official blessing of priests for.

Metropolitan Hilarion: I would like to clarify and perhaps even disappoint someone: the published text is only a draft document. The Inter-Council Presence is an advisory body of the Russian Orthodox Church. It prepares documents for the Councils of Bishops. That is, the document will be considered accepted only when it is approved by the Council of Bishops. Drafts are published and put up for public viewing and discussion so that a Church member can make their own amendments or declare that they

reject this document. That is, "Ethical issues related to the method of in vitro fertilization" is a document for discussion, and it is now published in this form.

The document itself states that there are different points of view within the Russian Orthodox Church. There is a point of view that IVF (in vitro fertilization) is unacceptable in any form at all. There is a point of view reflected in this document, according to which in vitro fertilization is possible under certain conditions. Among these conditions – there should be no killing of "excess" embryos and their cryopreservation, donor germ cells should not be used, and there is also a number of other restrictions prescribed in this document. The document was born in the depths of the Inter-Council Presence in the Commission on Theology and Theological Education, which I head. This commission addresses the cross-cutting topic of bioethics: we work on one bioethical issue after another, discuss and prepare draft documents.

I must state that even within our Commission there was no unity on this issue. We have prepared this document, outlined the existing points of view, and now the Church will have to determine whether in vitro fertilization is permissible under a number of conditions or it is unacceptable at all under any conditions.

E. Gracheva: I have recently talked to a gynecologist and asked her about statistics on how many women around the age of 40 get pregnant naturally. The figures for Moscow are frightening: at one large hospital, only 4 percent of 40-year-old (or older) women get pregnant naturally, without using IVF. The IVF department at the Institute of Endocrinology in Moscow is expanding at a serious pace. Gynecologists are actively campaigning for women who are close to or have already passed the 40 mark to freeze their eggs. It is not known what document the Russian Orthodox Church will adopt tomorrow, and it is possible that Orthodox women will also receive blessings to conceive a child with their spouses in this way. Would you bless women to freeze their eggs?

Metropolitan Hilarion: I can't give you a definitive answer. What is definitely unacceptable from the point of view of the Church is any manipulation related to embryos, for example, cryopreservation of embryos. If we are talking about this, then we cannot give a blessing here. As for cryopreservation of eggs, I think different priests will respond differently today.

I must say that in general, the problem of infertility for women aged 40 or 40+, and even those who are 30 or less, truly exists. This problem is very often faced by our Orthodox believers. There is a traditional answer that says that if a married couple is infertile, then they are encouraged to either accept this infertility as God's permission or as a gift from God, or to adopt children. But there are also married couples who, being Orthodox people, resort to various modern technologies.

This is a very delicate and complex issue. This is the question of wh ere the limits of what is permissible are, and it is currently being discussed at the Inter-Council Presence of the Russian Orthodox Church. For example, I am a clergyman and a monk, what can I really know about childbirth, about donor cells? Of course, we learn something from books and literature, but to give a competent answer, we must involve specialists. We get such specialists involved, and they participate in the discussion at the preparatory stages. In addition, we involve clergymen and lay people who specialize on this particular topic. I think sooner or later we will come to conclusions on this issue, which is not caused by the desire to create a theoretical basis for any practice, but rather by a living and urgent pastoral necessity.

E. Gracheva: Thank you very much, Vladyka, for answering our questions.

Metropolitan Hilarion: Thank you, Ekaterina.

In the second part of the program, Metropolitan Hilarion answered questions from viewers that were sent to the website of the Church and the World program.

Question: Vladyka, I watched your interview wh ere you said that you had never read the children's book "Deniskin's Stories". Have you managed to read it? Do children even need to read children's books?

Metropolitan Hilarion: I haven't managed to read this book because I don't have enough free time to do it. Children, of course, need to read children's books. Maybe you mean: do adults need to read children's books? I can't answer this question unequivocally. I think that it is useful for some adults to read children's books. For example, I advise some adults to read "Winnie the Pooh" at least in order to raise their spirits. In addition, we remember the words that the Lord Jesus Christ addressed to adults: "Unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 18.3). That is why there is nothing wrong with adults reading children's books.

Question: You have written six books about Jesus Christ. Why so many?

Metropolitan Hilarion: When I started writing about Jesus Christ, I thought that I would write only one book. I wanted to write a biographical book, that is, not just another theological treatise on Jesus Christ as God Incarnate, but a book about Jesus Christ as a human being. I wanted to talk about what kind of person He was, what He did, what kind of character He had. I have based this book solely on the evidence of the Gospel, that is, I have not taken anything from any outside sources or from sources rejected by the Church. I relied on the testimony of the Gospel and cited the interpretations of ancient and modern commentators.

Why have I ended up with six volumes? Because it turned out that there is a lot of material. There was so much of it that after writing a whole volume, I realized that I had only touched on the most basic points. The material was growing. As the Gospel says,"There are also many other things that Jesus did, which if they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written." (John 21: 25).

In addition, I decided to look at the life and teachings of Jesus Christ thematically, that is, I divided all the material into thematic blocks. In the first volume, I talk in general about what the Gospel is, why there are four Gospels, and not more or fewer; why the Church selected some of the Gospels and recognized them as canonical, while rejecting other literary works which were also called Gospels; how the Gospels are connected with each other; what are the contradictions and similarities between them. All this lengthy material is included in the first volume of my book. In the first volume I also talk about the birth of Jesus Christ, about His childhood and the beginning of His public ministry – how He went out to preach.

The entire second volume of this work is devoted to the Sermon on the Mount of Jesus Christ, that is, His moral teaching.

The third volume is devoted entirely to the miracles of Jesus Christ. I speak not only about each of the miracles that He performed, but in general: what a miracle is, how can one treat it, how people treated miracles in different ages, how they treat miracles in our time, and what meaning do miracles have in human life.

In the fourth volume, I talk about the parables of Jesus Christ, for example, I try to answer the question why Jesus Christ spoke in parables. After all, this is answered in different ways. Some say that He spoke in parables in order to make it easier for people to understand His teachings. Then there are those who say: no, on the contrary, He wanted to complicate the understanding of His teaching. I touch on this question. I speak of what a parable is, who used parables before Jesus Christ, what are the features of this genre, what brings a parable closer to a fairy tale, to poetry, to works of folklore. Then I look at each of the parables of the Lord Jesus Christ separately.

In volume five, I write about the Gospel of John, which stands out among the four Gospels.

The entire sixth volume is dedicated to the passions of Jesus Christ, His death on the cross, and His resurrection.

Since there was a lot of material, it turned out to be six volumes. However, when I realized some time

later that many people would not be able to read six volumes due to lack of time, I reduced them to one and published a book in *The Lives of Distinguished People* series called *Jesus Christ*. It contains the same arguments, but only in a much more concise form.

Question: What does a word catechesis mean?

Metropolitan Hilarion: A catechesis is a word that is now widely used, translated from Greek it literally means "instruction", that is, teaching the truths of the faith.

There was a practice in the ancient Church: since it was mostly adults who would get baptized, they would undergo a catechesis process before taking part in the sacrament. They would come to the priest or bishop and listen to his lectures. This could last for a year or several years. Then, following the results of the catechesis, they would pass the exam, get permitted to partake in the sacrament of baptism and then get baptized.

In our time, the practice of catechesis is being revived. It usually doesn't last that long, but it can last anywhere from a few hours to several weeks, depending on the needs. In the course of this catechesis, a person also learns the foundational truths of the faith.

We always emphasize that a person must come to faith consciously. The sacrament of baptism is not just a ritual that can have some magical effect on a person. A person must accept the sacrament of baptism consciously, and if it is a question of infant baptism, then parents take responsibility for the upbringing of children. Accordingly, very often in our time it is not those who are preparing for baptism, but their parents who go through the catechesis process.

I would like to conclude this transmission with the words of the St. Apostle Paul from his Epistle to the Romans: "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom.10:17).

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

DECR Communication Service

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