



Problems of social ministry of religious communities in the situation of COVID-19 pandemic were discussed at the DECR



In the framework of the 19th International Educational Readings a round table on “Social Service in the Situation of Covid-19: Challenges and Actions” took place at the Moscow Patriarchate’s Department for External Church Relations on May 17, 2021.

Participating in it were clergymen and lay persons from various dioceses of the Russian Orthodox Church and from Roman Catholic and Protestant communities, as well as members of governmental and church public organizations. Ms Margarita Nelyubova, a DECR staff member, was the coordinator of this meeting. Archpriest Maksim Pletnev, head of the Coordination Center for Fighting against Drug and Alcohol Addiction of the Department of Church Charity and Social Ministry of the St. Petersburg diocese, moderated it.

During the meeting, representatives of different confessions exchanged experience of their social

service in the situation of the pandemic, with all the restrictions it entailed. They spoke about new projects and inter-confessional interaction.

Opening the meeting, DECR's secretary for inter-Christian relations hieromonk Stefan (Igumnov) welcomed the participants on behalf of Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Department for External Church Relations. Fr Stefan pointed out that inter-confessional cooperation was one of the most important areas of the DECR's activity, while the diaconical dimension of this cooperation had been a priority for many years. He continued to say that "the COVID-19 pandemic had challenged Christians in many ways. First of all it demanded that the Christian communities should help those who were struck by this adversity. Clergymen were working in the most dangerous places, including the so-called 'red zones,' offering spiritual support to the people. Secondly, the pandemic had plunged the whole world into confusion and uncertainty. People were frightened and needed spiritual support. In such situation, it was important for them to get spiritually encouraging explanations for what was happening. The Church responded to their need. Although the introduction of quarantine restricted public life and activity, including the parish life and worship, divine services never stopped, and prayers never ceased." Fr Stefan also said that at the peak of the pandemic the primates of Christian Churches were coordinating their positions and joint humanitarian projects were being carried out. For instance, the Russian Orthodox Church, at the request from Italy, insured the delivery of medical masks, disinfectants and other things of daily use to the Apulia region.

"Christians met COVID-19's challenge in a proper way and responded to it, though not without some mistakes in the approach to this disease, which should teach us a good lesson. The most important thing is to bear in mind that challenges of any kind make Christian response to them very much in demand," concluded Fr Stefan.

An external church relations specialist of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the European part of Russia, probst Yelena Bondarenko shared the experience of the Lutherans during the pandemic. Among the parishioners of St. Peter and Paul's cathedral in Moscow, there are two groups - Russian-German and French. The first group was watching the divine services conducted by the pastors via the broadcast, while the second was interactively participating in the services via Skype on the Internet. Having no opportunity of giving the Holy Communion to the parishioners, the pastors "suspended their own partaking of the Communion until the worshippers were present at the church service again." The pastors' decision was based on the assumption that "partaking of the Holy Communion was proper if taken together, in the community of the worshippers present at the church service." The volunteers from the Lutheran Church helped elderly people. They delivered food, medicine and Easter presents to them. Much attention was also given to the support of the French-speaking group that united parishioners from five African countries, students for the most part, who needed warm clothes and food, as well as assistance in organizing commemoration worships to pray together with all other parish members for the

repose of the souls of their deceased African relatives. In cooperation with the Gustav-Adolf-Werk society and the DECR, the Lutheran community carried through a project of assistance to the Syrian Evangelical communities. At their request, masks and vitamins were shipped to Syria. In the second half of 2020, the divine services in the cathedral were resumed. Last Christmas and at Easter this year, the services were celebrated with the participation of the parish members, but the broadcasted services continued all the same –for the sake of the elderly parishioners. The Church also resumed its public services, such as the Bible studies, social parties for the parishioners, and lessons at the Sunday school for children.

Mr. Pyotr Gumenyuk, head of department for relations with Russia of the Aid to the Church in Need Foundation, spoke about the results of the work done by the Joint Working Group of the Roman Catholic and Russian Orthodox Churches. The group was set up to develop cooperation between the two churches as a follow-up of the historic meeting between Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia and Pope Francis held in Havana in 2016. For over four years the group has been working for promoting traditional Christian values and helping Christians in the Middle East. Because of the pandemic some joint projects had to be suspended, but they are not given up, and the preparations continue even more scrupulously and on a deeper level, as for example is the case with the Turin Shroud display to be organized in several Russian cities or that with the next international conference on pastoral psychiatry.

Fr Igor Kovalevsky, General Secretary of the Conference of Catholic Bishops of Russia and parish administrator of Ss. Peter and Paul's Cathedral in Moscow, told the participants about the activities of Roman-Catholic organizations and communities at the time of the self-isolation. He mentioned that a year earlier, at the time before Easter, the Catholic communities, like many other confessions, had been in a state of "dismay and perplexity" until it was decided to conduct divine services without parishioners and broadcast them on the Internet. He added that "the pandemic made us see that we had underestimated the role of cyberspace for pastoral service, but at the same time, he warned, we should not overestimate it. The virtual participation in the divine services should be an exception." Fr Kovalevsky also spoke about social ministry of the Roman Catholic Church in the conditions of the pandemic. He mentioned in particular that the Caritas Catholic organization, active in twenty-free Russian cities, had taken care of homeless people in Moscow with the support of the Ibis hotel chain, and organized food delivery for children from low-income families and in St. Petersburg and Luga. In Pskov, Nizhny Novgorod and St. Petersburg, the delivery of food and lunch boxes was provided for the homeless who had used to eat at the Caritas-sponsored soup kitchens that were closed for the time of the pandemic.

The Bishop Maletsky Day-Care Centre of support for children and teenagers with special needs, which aim is their training, education and social engagement, continued its work online. This work has united many people, not only the Catholics and the believers, but "many people of good will." "There is only

one medicine for virus – our unity,” Rev. Igor Kovalevsky said.

Pastor Ruslan Nadyuk, dean of the faculty of additional vocational education of the Moscow Seminary of Evangelical Christians, and Ms Nina Belyakova, consulting psychologist of the “Vstan!” centre, told the audience about the work of Christian groups which are rendering aid to the families with the addicts amidst the pandemic. The problems existing between a person with chemical dependency and members of his/her family might aggravate to the point of the life-threatening condition during the pandemic. Also presented was a topic of the rules of conduct in this situation. “Both codependency and dependency are a complex bio-psycho-socio- and spiritual condition based on the depravity of human nature because of the ancestral sin. People are apt to deny responsibility for their actions and put the blame on others. In the result, relations among near and dear might break, and the need in help becomes greater. During trials like pandemic, these problems are becoming even more acute. Christian counseling groups of mutual assistance working on the basis of the 12 Step Program are rendering real help, Ms Belyakova added. These groups have no missionary tasks; they are a kind of “spiritual kindergarten” and “an important step on the way to bringing the participants to church.” The main resource of these groups is the therapeutic interaction which helps meet psychological needs, such as being heard or forgiving insults and offences. During the pandemic the work of these groups and psychological consultations continued, but was “reformatted” for online, but “their therapeutic effect has not become worse.” Such an aid is especially needed because of the aggravating problem of domestic violence in the families shut in under lockdown.

Mr Sergey Grigorash, head of the Health Ministries Department of the West Russian Union Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, told the participants in the meeting about volunteer work during the pandemic. Volunteers, including fifty pastors and many community members, delivered food packages and other necessities to those in need. Over seventy thousand face masks were sewn by Adventists in the first months of the pandemic for medical doctors in hospitals, disabled people and multi-child families. Food packages were delivered to families raising children with disabilities and online consultations with speech therapists, psychologists and other specialists were organised for such children. The Zaoksky Adventist University arranged for medical doctors to visit patients in nearby villages. Having given an overview of these and other charity projects, Mr Grigorash called upon all those present to pray that God may help them be sensitive and responsive to people’s needs.

Archpriest Georgy Artaryan, rector of the Church of the Holy Trinity in Dolgoderevenskoye Village, Chelyabinsk Region, and psychologist Svetlana Abalmazova shared with the participants in the round table their experience of efficient using the Internet at the time of lockdown restrictions. Their webinars on family psychology and teenage problems and online consultations on such topics as “coronaphobias,” “thanatophobia,” “job loss” and “pre-divorce situations” got thousands of views among residents of Chelyabinsk and the Chelyabinsk Region. The Holy Trinity parish worked hand in

glove with municipal and non-governmental organisations, holding webinars for substitute families and online seminars on the problem of teenage suicide. A counselling centre operating at the parish also had to work remotely during the pandemic. Most of those seeking counselling at the time were dealing with the fear of death, job loss, loneliness, etc.

The parish also offers post-COVID-19 rehabilitation to children and adults. With the view of rendering domiciliary aid to the diseased at the height of the epidemic when hospitals were short of beds, the parish purchased an oxygen concentrator.

The Shelter of Hope Crisis Centre was opened at the parish in December 2020 to help, in particular, women who were victims of domestic violence or refused to have an abortion. During the pandemic the parish also assisted multi-child families and low-income parishioners with clothing and foodstuffs. Male parishioners who were actively involved in charity work set up a group called “Do Good.”

Ms Alyona Sadikova, director of the Kitezkh Crisis Centre, told the participants in the round table about the organisation’s activities during the pandemic. The centre operates at a metochion of the Novospassky Monastery, helping women with children – victims of domestic violence. The Kitezkh Centre continued its work in lockdown. “In March-April we closed our main shelter because of the lockdown. It was full, but we did not admit new women, providing counselling by phone, through messengers, in social networks and by email. From the mid-May 2020 to January 2021 we saw a gradual rise in calls for help. On average, in some months their number grew two-and-a-half-fold,” Ms Sadikova said. Some hotels came to the aid by offering accommodation to women and even employing some of them. Currently the work is underway to open a new 56-bed shelter, the head of the Kitezkh Centre noted.

According to Ms Sadikova, all these efforts would have failed had it not been for the constant active cooperation with secular organisations and various religious associations engaged in such ministry. “Synergy helps us survive. COVID has brought us together,” she said in conclusion.

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