# Metropolitan Hilarion: to defeat the pandemic, we need a general mobilization



*On June 19th, 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 relation (DECR), answered questions fr om the anchor Ekaterina Gracheva.*

**E. Gracheva:** Hello! This is the time of questions and answers on the program "The Church and the World" on the channel "Rossiya 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, Catherine! Hello dear brothers and sisters!

**E. Gracheva**: Without a doubt, the main topic of this week is the bilateral summit in Geneva between Russia and the United States, which many have already dubbed a historic meeting. Indeed, this is the first meeting between the new US President Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin. It is noteworthy that in the program that we recorded shortly before this summit, you foresaw much of what Biden and Putin spoke about at their separate press conferences. What do you associate this with? Where does this political acumen come from?

**Metropolitan Hilarion:** This probably means that I understand something, because after all, for more

than twelve years I have been engaged in Church foreign policy, which cannot but be connected with secular foreign policy. There are questions that lie on the surface, and you don't need to be an expert to assume that in the current situation, the presidents will talk about certain things and other things they will not discuss. Indeed, a very alarming situation has developed in relations between the United States and Russia, and the fact that the two presidents met, in my opinion, is a very important step aimed at cutting the Gordian knot and starting to resolve the problems that have accumulated. There are many of these problems. The presidents spoke about this very openly. I must say that in addition to the information about the meeting, which I carefully watched on Russian TV channels, I also watched what was said on Western TV channels, in particular, on CNN. You know, those observers who specialize in Russia (namely, they were invited as experts), of course, could not hide their disappointment with the results of the meeting. They said that it was an undoubted success for President Putin, because President Biden did not devote so much time to any of the world leaders during his European tour, and here they met for five hours. It was a very big and frank conversation. And those observers who wanted this meeting to harm Russia expressed their sincere disappointment.

**E. Gracheva:** Naturally, quotes fr om Biden and Putin spread throughout the media. I singled out for myself a certain quote fr om Biden. It seemed to me that it says a lot about US foreign policy and Biden's attitude towards it: "All foreign policy is a logical continuation of personal relationships." As a person who is involved in the foreign policy of the Russian Orthodox Church, do you agree with this or not?

**Metropolitan Hilarion:** I find it difficult to agree with this, because, for example, I had excellent personal relations with Patriarch Bartholomew. I talked about this in our program. At his invitation, I went to his homeland on the island of Imvros, he showed me the school which he attended. This personal relationship, in my opinion, was very sincere, humane and deep. But when the question arose of protecting the interests of the Church, then, naturally, I could not agree with the actions that Patriarch Bartholomew took to the detriment of our Church. I think that his relationship with Patriarch Kirill was also good. I remember the first visit of Patriarch Kirill to Istanbul after his enthronement and the return visit of Patriarch Bartholomew, there were many interesting personal moments that testified to the readiness of the two Church leaders to follow the joint path. But when Patriarch Bartholomew, under the influence of external factors, made decisions that damaged the Russian Church and inter-Orthodox relations in general, it became impossible to talk about any friendship, respect and good relations.

Therefore, personal relationships are important, but, as President Putin said after the meeting with President Biden, above all, political relationships should be pragmatic. Each leader protects the interests of his country and at the same time he must be able to build relationships with neighbors. If we are talking about such major nuclear powers as the United States and Russia, then the security of the whole world depends on stable relations between them.

**E. Gracheva:** Vladyka, I don’t want to talk about the pandemic, but we have to return to this topic again. Obviously, we are now witnessing the third wave of the epidemic. In Moscow alone, where we live, the average daily increase is over seven thousand people. If earlier we talked about voluntary vaccination and it was emphasized by both the president and the mayor of Moscow that this procedure would be exclusively voluntary, now we are already talking about compulsory vaccination and the fact that people in general can lose their jobs if they are not vaccinated ... I'm talking about the list of people who work in the service sector, education, transport, and so on. How do you feel about this initiative, initiated by Sobyanin, that 60 percent of employees should be vaccinated without fail?

**Metropolitan Hilarion:** I have a positive attitude to this initiative. I think it is very desirable to adhere to the principle of voluntariness in relation to vaccinations, which was declared from the very beginning, but there is also a principle of people's responsibility for the lives of others. We have repeatedly said in our program that a person who is not vaccinated causes potential damage not only to himself, but also to those around him. We must understand that this is essentially a war, because biological weapons have been used against us. This is a war for human survival. When the Great Patriotic War was declared, there were many volunteers, but if only volunteers went to the front, then we would not have won this war, but rather lost. A general mobilization was announced. So, in order to defeat this virus, we need to declare a general mobilization in some areas, especially in the service sector, wh ere people have access to a wide range of people, I think that vaccination for some categories of people should become mandatory.

If we compare our situation with the situation in a number of Western European countries, then let us remember that there are still people waiting in line for vaccination, because there are not enough vaccines. We have enough vaccines for everyone, but vaccination is not happening at the pace that is needed to defeat the virus. If we keep the same pace, then we will have this pandemic for another year, or even two or three.

**E. Gracheva:** Vladyka, when you say that biological weapons were used against us, do you mean it in the literal sense: created by human hands?

**Metropolitan Hilarion:** I, of course, used a metaphor, just as when I said about general mobilization. But we must understand that the origin of this virus, as many people think, is artificial. Even if it happened naturally, this does not change the essence of the matter at all, and our task is to defeat this virus as soon as possible. In order to defeat it, vaccines have been created, but, unfortunately, no one has yet created a vaccine against stupidity and a cure for selfishness. And among us there are a lot of people who are extremely irresponsible about what is happening. There are even doctors who say that it is better to get sick than to get vaccinated. This is such an irresponsible statement that I would deprive doctors who make such statements. Unfortunately, there are priests who dissuade people from being

vaccinated under various pretexts. I think this is an extremely irresponsible behavior, because we are all responsible not only for ourselves, but also for the people around us. A person who does not vaccinate for some personal reason - because of his own stupidity, prejudice, or because someone persuaded him to such a decision - behaves irresponsibly not only in relation to himself, but also in relation to people around.

**E. Gracheva:** Do we see the double standards in the fact that in a number of Moscow churches (I myself was a witness of this) parishioners are asked to put on masks, the sacrament of confession in these churches has become public (usually this happens on big holidays as an exception), and they still receive communion not with disposable utensils, but with one spoon. It may even be treated with a cloth with alcohol, but we understand that this is not the kind of disinfection that we expect to see. What could you say by the rectors of such churches?

**Metropolitan Hilarion:** To the rectors of such churches, I could only say what His Holiness the Patriarch said more than a year ago, when the pandemic began and the means for sanitizing communion spoons and a number of other measures were developed to minimize the risks. These measures do not completely eliminate the risks, but significantly reduce the risk contracting the infection.

In my parish, from the very beginning of the pandemic, I introduced the disinfection of the spoon after each participant by dipping it, first in pure alcohol, and then in hot water. I have consulted many experts who said that this is a fairly effective disinfection method. I also demand that all parishioners wear masks and maintain social distance whenever possible. We are not currently conducting individual confessions during the divine service. A person can come to confess individually, having agreed with the priest, and he must come outside of service hours.

Then, when we began to introduce these restrictive measures, I noticed another interesting moment: during the service we kiss different objects many times. When, for example, a bishop is serving, priests, deacons, and subdeacons constantly kiss his hands. Every time, when something is handed to him, both of his hands are kissed. This happens dozens, maybe hundreds of times in one service. I cancelled all of this in my church, because in a normal situation it may have some definite meaning, but under the current circumstances of the pandemic, such signs of respect that suggest bodily contact are inappropriate, in my opinion,

**E. Gracheva:** This week there was a meeting of the Holy Synod and it was quite long. As I understand it, a wide range of topics was discussed, and, apparently, the third wave of the pandemic too. However, I did not find a detailed list of topics for discussion. Why is that? Why are the topics not made public

before the meeting?

**Metropolitan Hilarion:** Firstly, before the meeting, the agenda of the Synod, as a rule, is not made public, except for those cases when a public event has occurred and the Synod is going to react to it, as was the case, for example, with the invasion of Ukraine by Constantinople. We then convened the Synod precisely in order to react to this event.

When it comes to the current meeting of the Synod, the issues that need to be resolved should not be voiced in advance. I'll give you a simple example. At meetings of the Synod, we always make certain personnel decisions. These personnel decisions may concern a person who, say, as a priest, will be elevated to the rank of bishop, or the bishop will be removed from his pulpit. If such questions are voiced in advance, it means that everything will pour out into the press, someone will try to influence the Synod, or its individual members. In general, a lot of disgrace can come from all this. Therefore, the agenda of the Synod, as a rule, is not announced in advance.In this case, one of the issues that we discussed for a very long time concerned the Yekaterinburg remains. We have heard reports from His Grace Tikhon and a representative of the Investigative Committee. We were presented with a very clear and unambiguous picture of how the Investigative Committee, on the basis of many examinations carried out in different laboratories of the world, now sees the question of the authenticity of the Yekaterinburg remains. We have listened to this report with great attention. We have handed over the final solution of this issue to the discretion of the Bishops' Council, which will be held in November this year. I think that the Council of Bishops will put an end to this story, which lasted nearly a quarter of a century.

**E. Gracheva:** Will the decision be positive, do you think?

**Metropolitan Hilarion:** I hope this will be a positive decision.

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

**Metropolitan Hilarion:** Thank you, Catherine.

*In the second part of the show, Metropolitan Hilarion answered questions of TV viewers, which were received on the website of the Church and the World program.*

**Question:** Vladyka, I ask you to answer my question: what is God or rather: who is He? Everyone believes in something different and this is wh ere all the contradictions associated with religion come from.

**Metropolitan Hilarion:** I must say that for Christianity God is not what, but who. When people say: I believe that somewhere in heaven there is some kind of force or energy, this does not correspond to the Orthodox understanding of God. God is a living being with whom a person can come into personal contact. This personal contact is carried out through prayer, participation in Church sacraments, and also through consideration of our surroundings. For a believing person sees the Creator in what surrounds us in the created world, but an unbelieving person does not.

I often compare this situation to a painting exhibition. A person comes to the gallery and they tell him: these paintings were made by such and such an artist, they call his name, give the details of the biography. But a person, of course, is not obliged to believe this. He may believe that these paintings appeared by themselves, somehow arose, then they themselves moved into this room and in this way this picture gallery appeared by chance, without an artist. Something like this is reasoned by people who do not believe that God exists.

The Orthodox Church has a very clear idea of who God is. We say, first of all, that God is one. Secondly, that God exists in three Persons - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is not some kind of invention of theologians, but rather how God had revealed Himself to mankind. These theophanies of God are described in the Holy Scriptures.

We say that God is the Creator of everything that exists; God in Himself possesses absolute goodness, that is, absolute good - in Him there is no evil, no contradiction; God exists eternally: no one created Him, and He Himself is the Creator of everything that surrounds us.

In general, the Orthodox Church has a very clear doctrine and a very clear understanding of who God is. And if people understand God in different ways, it is because so many do not listen to the voice of the Church. They create for themselves some kind of an idea of God and then follow it. This is wh ere the disagreements come from. There is no disagreement within the Orthodox Church as to who God is.

**Question:** In my opinion, vaccination is a manifestation of little faith and ignorance, a bright manifestation of fear, denial that God is omnipotent, and that everything happens only according to His will. You, Vladyka, have already been ill with Covid - this is sad, but I am sure that you did not recover from this illness in order to propagate vaccination, but rather for something useful and important to you in the future. Honestly, I am very confused by your position on this issue.

**Metropolitan Hilarion:** And I honestly admit that your position does not just confuse me, but outrages me. Arguing that vaccination is a manifestation of fear is about the same as arguing that if one stops at a red light and waits for cars to pass, then this is a manifestation of fear, because people must go forward, and God, if He wants to, will stop those cars and they will not hit anyone. This is a manifestation of

stupidity. Unfortunately, I have to tell you this openly.

Maybe you are a young and healthy person. I do not know. Maybe you personally do not need this vaccination, but you can infect the elderly people who are near you, who will get sick because of this, will suffer from this disease in the most severe form. For the sake of this alone, you need to discard all these silly thoughts that come to your mind – or implanted by someone else - go to the vaccination center and get vaccinated, first chance you get.

**Question:** I am an Orthodox believer, and my special someone is a practicing Catholic. We respect each other's faith, and belonging to different Churches does not interfere with our relationship. I go to church with him, and he, in turn, attends Orthodox churches with me. We are both ready to give in to each other in choosing which church to marry at. The Orthodox priest, to whom I turned for advice, reacted very negatively to my question, saying that such marriages were prohibited by our Church.

**Metropolitan Hilarion:** I must say that this priest either deceived you, or he does not know the rules that exist in the Russian Orthodox Church, or it is, perhaps, a priest not of the Russian Orthodox Church, but of some other Local Church.

In the Russian Orthodox Church, the rules regarding the wedding of Orthodox Christians with Catholics are spelled out in an official Church document. It is called "The Basics of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church." This document has been published on the Internet and is freely available. You can find the corresponding article in it and it says in black and white that marriages between Orthodox and Catholics are officiated in the Orthodox Church, provided that the children are brought up in the Orthodox faith. Therefore, if a priest has given you erroneous or false information, contact another priest or the ruling bishop of the diocese in which you live.

I would like to conclude this program with the words from the First Epistle of the Holy Apostle Peter: "And above all things have fervent love for one another, for “love will cover a multitude of sins.”" (1 Pet. 4:8).

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

*DECR Communication Service*

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