



THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH
Department for External Church Relations

Presentation of the book *The Gospel according to Dostoevsky* by Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk in Moscow



On June 22, 2021, the presentation of the book *The Gospel according to Dostoevsky* by Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, head of the Department for External Church Relations and rector of St Cyril and Methodius Institute of Post-Graduate Studies, took place at the central building of the Vladimir Dal Museum of the History of Russian Literature.

The event was attended, among others, by D. Bak, director of the State Literary Museum; V. Zakharov, honorary president of the International Dostoevsky Society; P. Fokin, head of the department 'Dostoevsky Apartment-Museum' of the State Literary Museum; I. Volgin, president of the Dostoevsky Foundation; as well as specialists in Dostoevsky's creative work.

The presentation was opened by Mr. D. Bak. He congratulated Metropolitan Hilarion on being given the State Award of the Russian Federation 'for his contribution to the development of Russian culture and educational work'. Mr. Bak called the publication of his new book one of the important events in the world of literature.

Then a short fragment from Metropolitan Hilarion's docuseries 'The Gospel according to Dostoevsky' was screened to mark the writer's 200th birthday.

The next speaker was Mr. Fokin, who said in particular, 'It is extremely important that Dostoevsky is spoken about by one of our most authoritative theologians and hierarchs of the Church', and pointed to the uniqueness of Metropolitan Hilarion's new book as it slightly opens the secret of the spiritual world and outlook of the great Russian writer.

In acknowledgement of Metropolitan Hilarion's contribution to the study and popularization of Dostoevsky's creative legacy, to the Russian culture, preservation of the Russian language and charitable work. Mr. Fokin presented Metropolitan Hilarion with the public award of the Kemerovo Region - the Order of Dostoevsky, which was established in Kuzbass in the year of the writer's 200th birthday.

Then president of the International Dostoevsky Society Prof V. Sakharov, PhD, addressed the participants and guests. He thanked Metropolitan Hilario for the presented book and spoke in particular about his studies of Dostoevsky's literary heritage, the Gospel according to Dostoevsky and Christian aspects of the writer's creative work.

Addressing those present, Metropolitan Hilarion spoke about the background of writing the book, in which he, in particular, compares the work of Fyodor Dostoevsky to the good news of Christ brought by prophets and apostles.

"In the beginning of the calendar year, I was visiting my old friend, outstanding Russian diplomat Alexander Vladimirovich Yakovenko, who in his time was a deputy minister of foreign affairs of the Russian Federation and later an ambassador to Great Britain and who is now the rector of the Diplomatic Academy of Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Alexander Vladimirovich showed me a facsimile edition of the Gospel that belonged to Dostoevsky. The exterior of the edition is unique: a three-volume set is placed in a box made in the form of a prison carriage. Lying in the middle of it is Dostoevsky's facsimile Gospel, to the left of it - a large fundamental volume of studies and to the right - another volume that actually collects all the citations from the Gospel

according to Dostoevsky, all the allusions and commentaries made by Dostoevsky to the Gospel and comments on the writer's notes.

Of course, I was so much impressed by this rare edition (it came out in a limited edition) that I could not conceal my great desire to have it. And a few weeks after, I received that edition as a gift. A note was attached to it expressing a hope that this book will be of benefit for my academic work.

Then the coronavirus pandemic began and I found myself in the bed of disease, in the quarantine. Sometime in late summer, I returned to this edition, attentively studied it and realized that I wanted to create a film about the Gospel according to Dostoevsky. The more so that his 200th birthday and the 140th anniversary since his death were approaching and it would be good to create a docuseries. The reel presented today to your attention are in fact some shorts from the film, which I hope will come out in autumn.

The film was put in the basis of the book I am presenting today. Usually I first write a book and then shoot a film based on the book. But now it was the other way round: first, there was the idea of a film and then, as the work was carried out on the material, this book was made up.

Of course, against the background of what has been done in Dostoevsky studies, Dostoevsky criticism, Dostoevistics (all the three terms were voiced today), it is very difficult to say anything new and original about Dostoevsky. The creative work of this great Russian writer and prophet has been studied inside out. But I never take up certain themes for books or films with the aim to say without fail something new or original. Moreover, I never write my books for anybody else except for myself. I write to clarify something for myself, to arrange something 'on shelves'. First of all, I am interested in the very process of writing books. And the fact that these books are published and someone reads them is, I would say, a collateral consequence of the process.

Dostoevsky has played a very important role in my spiritual background as I came to know this writer in my early youth. Being still a schoolboy, I read almost all his works. Later I did not return to him for many years but his image and his ideas were present in my life.

When I saw that edition, the Gospel according to Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky, I realized, first, the colossal volume of work that was carried out to study Dostoevsky's Gospel, and secondly, the extent and depth to which Fyodor Mikhailovich studied this sacred book, and I myself came to feel the desire to write about Dostoevsky.

The title of my book - *The Gospel according to Dostoevsky* - has a twofold meaning. First, I speak in fact about the Gospel according to Dostoevsky - the book that he read all his life from the penal colony

to the very death. This book is still kept in the Russian State Library, and I had an opportunity and happiness to hold it in my hands. I wanted to tell about the influence it made on Dostoevsky's work on the basis of primarily the four novels of his 'great pentateuch' - Crime and Punishment, Idiot, Demons and The Karamazov Brothers, and certainly on the basis of his own life, his biography, which set forth in this book not consecutively but there are facts about his spiritual journey, and this journey was not very easy.

At the meeting of the Synodal Biblical-Theological Commission this morning, which I guide, we studied the work of one of our outstanding theologians - Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov). In his books, Father Sophrony often describes three periods in one's spiritual life: the giving of grace, the digression from it and finding it again. In the beginning, one develops what in the theological language is called anticipatory grace, that is to say, God touches one's heart. It may happen in one's infancy, childhood, early youth. It is still the unconscious coming in touch with God to be lost later and one experiences a crisis, abandonment by God. And then the person again finds God but on a completely different level. Father Sophrony himself walked this path.

We can see something like this in Dostoevsky's life as well. He was raised in the Orthodox faith, from his childhood he knew the basic stories of Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, and he came to love them; they imbibed his child's consciousness. But later came a period of his attraction to the ideas of socialist utopians, for which he had to pay by penal servitude. At the same time it is interesting that Dostoevsky never believed his grave punishment to be undeserved. No, it was fair because we would have been condemned by the Russian people, he said. Dostoevsky understood that the Lord Himself led him through trials so that his hosanna could pass through 'a hearth of doubts' and he could come to a completely different level of perception of the faith and Christianity.

Going through the terrible and tragic experience of penal servitude, going through it with the Gospel in his hands in both literal and metaphorical sense of these words, he returned from the penal colony as a different man of course. There he developed a creed in which the central place was occupied by Jesus Christ.

In all his major works Dostoevsky one way or another tries to come closer to the shining image of Christ.

In *Crime and Punishment*, he recounts what precedes the beginning of one's spiritual re-birth. As we remember, a turning point in this novel happens when Sonya is reading to Raskolnikov about Lazarus's rising from the dead. The novel ends in the motive of restoration of a fallen man and concludes with Raskolnikov, already a convict, having the Gospel lying under his pillow. It is an autobiographical moment of course.

In *Idiot*, we see how Fyodor Mikhailovich tries to come closer to the image of Christ through the Christ-like image of Prince Myshkin.

In *Demons*, Dostoevsky acts as a prophet and speaks of what Christianity and anti-Christianity are. He appears to be the only man of his time who was able to discern in the socialist ideology not just a counterbalance to capitalism, not just a certain political doctrine but its anti-religious nature, asserting that socialism would replace not capitalism but Christianity - what Nikolay Berdyaev would say later; for Dostoevsky's ideas and views made a tremendous influence on Berdyaev's philosophy. In *Demons*, Dostoevsky shows the anti-Christian nature of the very doctrine, which later on would lead Russia to a catastrophe, thus predicting the catastrophe itself.

Finally, *The Karamazov Brothers*, which is again Dostoevsky's spiritual autobiography. In the images of three brothers the writer describes himself in various period of his life. He put his ideas in the mouths of each of them. And there are two more attempts to create Christ-like images - those of Alyosha Karamazov and Staretz Zosima. Here Dostoevsky comes close to the core of the religious church life. He slightly opens the veil over what in the Church is the most important and innermost.

If we compare the work of Dostoevsky (I speak about it in my book) to the work of Russian-Soviet writers, with what they said about the Church, we will see that, as strange as it may seem, in the Russian literature the Church is presented very weakly and superficially. Perhaps, Leskov was the only writer who displayed some interest in church themes, but he was interested only in the superficial side of the Church's life. He described the life of clergy, their everyday life and he could skilfully depict minutiae of the hierarchal life but he never went to the depth, and failed to discern and show to people the core of the church life. Perhaps that is why he lost his faith after all, for he failed to discern the most important thing in the Church.

But Dostoevsky did manage to discern what is the most important in the Church - living Christ. The personality of Jesus Christ, which stood in the center of his Christian world outlook, his personal creed, inspired him for creative achievements, for prophecies that he pronounced and occupied the central place in the whole of his creative work.

This is in fact the second meaning of the title of my book *The Gospel according to Dostoevsky*. It is not about the Gospel that Dostoevsky read all his life but about what he wrote. It is a good news that he bore through his creative work to his contemporaries and their descendants including us all and generations to come.

The destiny of his works is amazing. We can see, for instance, that Dostoevsky's prose is translated to

almost all the languages of the world, in which written language exists at all and that Dostoevsky is read in very diverse countries. If we speak of the preaching of Christ, of Orthodoxy, then in many countries it is through Dostoevsky's works that people may learn about the Russian culture, Russian history, Christ and Orthodoxy. It is an utterly striking phenomenon. There were many Russian, Byzantine theologians, but their works will not be read in Swahili, nor on some Seychellois, but Dostoevsky is read by all and everywhere. Take the same image of Starets Zosima, the writing of Starets Zosima, the image of Alyosha Karamazov, and people throughout the world will learn about them and the ideas they embody through Dostoevsky's work.

Therefore, we can speak about Dostoevsky as a prophet and apostle in our time of unbelief, of so-called pluralism when all the religious traditions are displayed like in a market. Dostoevsky addressed people of the whole world in various languages, bearing witness to Christ and to how Christ is experienced by the Orthodox person.

Dostoevsky was a profoundly Orthodox man; this is revealed in his works. Therefore, it is quite natural that his famous citation: 'If someone proved to me that Christ is outside the truth and that in reality the truth were outside of Christ, then I should prefer to remain with Christ rather than with the truth' is in some sense the leitmotif of Dostoevsky's whole work. I tried to show it in my book, in which I certainly rely on the achievements of both Dostoevics and the Russian religious thought and abundantly cite Russian religious philosophers and specialists in Dostoevsky's work, concentrating the attentions of the reader primarily on the Christian aspects in this works.

This is in fact what this book has been written for.

Thank you for your attention".

After the presentation the floor was taken by Mr. I. Volgin, president of the Dostoevsky Foundation, who congratulated His Eminence Hilarion on the publication of his new book and expressed a hope that the edition "will begin its victorious march through Russian cities, big and small".

As Prof. Dr. A. Gacheva, PhD, noted, the tradition of the church pastors addressing Dostoevsky is 100-years old. In his book *The Gospel according to Dostoevsky*, she said, we hear 'the voices of Antony (Khrapovitsky), Rev. Justin (Popovich), Vladimir Solovyev, Sergey Fidel. 'It is remarkable because a dialogue is being created between your word and the words of those who wrote about Dostoevsky in the 20th century, she stressed, 'Your book asserts the importance of both Dostoevsky as a Christian writer and that of the Russian religious philosophical tradition'.

In conclusion of the meeting, Metropolitan Hilarion thanked the participants and guests of the

presentation wishing them all good health and God's help.

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