Metropolitan Hilarion: state leaders should feel responsible for what is happening not only in their own countries, but all over the world



On July 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: Vladyka, we have now officially entered the third wave of the coronavirus pandemic and a new round of fighting this global disaster. Starting this week, restrictions have been imposed on visiting cafes and restaurants. Now one can only enter them if they have a QR-code. At the same time, air traffic to India, where the most aggressive strain of coronavirus came from, is still open. Schoolchildren in St. Petersburg, in the amount of several tens of thousands of people, gathered to celebrate the graduation. How do you view such controversial events that are taking place in our country?

Metropolitan Hilarion: I look at such events with concern, because, as I said in one of our previous programs, to defeat the coronavirus, we need a general mobilization. This means that everything that contributes to the spread of the virus should be temporarily suspended, including flights to countries where there is currently a very high degree of infection with this virus.

I think that the measures that are being taken in Moscow and St. Petersburg are generally adequate, but it is necessary to strictly monitor the dynamics of the spread of the virus. In the spring, we hoped that the virus had receded, when the numbers of infected people began to fall and the number of dying people began to decrease. We cheered up, decided that the main danger was over. Things turned out to be different. One of the reasons – perhaps the main reason – is that the population is being vaccinated at an insufficient rate. Everyone is talking about it now. This is no secret to anyone. Paradoxically, but still a fact: the country that was the first to invent the vaccine, the country which already has several coronavirus vaccines, remains one of the few places where far fewer people are vaccinated than it is necessary for the pandemic to end.

If we are talking about air traffic, then I think we need to ask: what is the urgent need for direct flights to India or to countries where there is still a high degree of infection? It may be worth suspending these flights, as it was at the very beginning of the pandemic, when most international flights were suspended.

E. Gracheva: Vladyka, as soon as vaccination became mandatory for a number of categories of citizens and employees, the issue of corruption became acute. During The Direct Line this week, the president was shown what fake certificates of medical withdrawal fr om vaccination and the presence of antibodies against Covid look like. What do you think should be the penalty for forgery of such medical documents, and what can you say about doctors who go to the trouble of providing such documents? As a clergyman, what words would you use to address them?

Metropolitan Hilarion: First, the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation already has an article that suggests that people who forge documents can receive criminal penalties, up to two years in prison. I think that in the current situation, it is quite likely and will be justified if people who are engaged in forgery of documents of this kind, will find themselves behind bars. We are now talking about health, national security, and people's lives. Every person who falsifies a document becomes a potential killer of other people, because he walks around among them and everyone is sure that he is protected and cannot be a carrier of a contagious virus. And yet it is not true.

After all, we often talk about the fact, also on our program, that the risk for a person to get sick is not limited to the person himself. The moment a person gets sick means that they may have already

infected at least a few people around them. Sometimes there are dozens of such people. So, a person goes to the hospital, and other people go to the hospital after him. This person himself can get sick in a mild form, he can recover, whereas other people will die.

I have recently heard of such a case at our church: a man came down to us and told this story. Previously, he was among the anti-vaxxers; for some fundamental reasons, he did not want to be vaccinated. He had an elderly mother, she asked him to get her vaccinated. He didn't and then she died. Then their neighbor died too, because she was taking care of this elderly mother. This man remained and now he comes to us and says: how do I continue to live? I do not know what to say to him, do not know how he should go on in life. He should have thought about it earlier.

Now many people come to us, people who have lost their loved ones because of their carelessness, negligence, because someone had brainwashed them, because they were confident in their own health. Those people either didn't get infected at all, or they got sick in a mild form, and yet – others died. Now they are tormented by remorse.

E. Gracheva: The other day, a whole range of emotions was caused by the performance of an actor Yegor Beroev at the TEFI award. He went on stage, put on a yellow star of David and compared vaccination to the Holocaust, saying that just like they divided people into Jews and non-Jews, likewise today they divide people into vaccinated and unvaccinated. I must say, the Jewish community did not appreciate Beroev's move. What do you say? Did you hear him speak?

Metropolitan Hilarion: I've heard about this story, and I've also heard what he said on stage: "My body – my choice." Now many people are talking about it. But if it was just your body, it would be entirely your problem. Each person can manage his life as he wants. One protects his health, the other does not. This is, after all, a personal matter for everyone. The problem is that, as we have said many, many times, and not only we, but everyone is now saying: a person who is unvaccinated, unprotected, is a threat to other people. I think it should be like this: if you don't want to get vaccinated, stay at home, don't go out, sit alone and wait for the pandemic to pass. If you want to be a member of society, go to restaurants, participate in some collective events, then you need to follow the measures prescribed by law.

Vaccination in our country is still voluntary, but for some categories of citizens who have a wide social circle, are engaged in the social sphere, communicate with the population, vaccination becomes mandatory. I think that any deviation from the norms that are currently being introduced is a state crime, including forgery of documents, false certificates of vaccination. I think it is very important that people develop a sense of responsibility not only for themselves, but also for their loved ones and for everyone around them. This applies, of course, to doctors, because, unfortunately, there are some doctors who

say that it is better to get sick than to get vaccinated. There are such doctors. I am, of course, struck by the logic of these doctors, but, nevertheless, such statements are constantly heard.

There are many people who refuse to get vaccinated for various reasons. If these reasons are valid, if there are any medical contraindications, then this is one case. And if these reasons are not valid, then it seems to me that such people should be treated with all severity.

E. Gracheva: Vladyka, more questions were directed to the President during The Direct Line. They were widely reported in the Russian and Western media. There was a question, of course, about the incident off the coast of Crimea with the British destroyer Defender. The question was: was the world on the verge of World War III? According to Vladimir Putin, it was not. What do you think? What consequences could this provocation off the coast of the Russian peninsula have had on the world?

Metropolitan Hilarion: I hope that the State leaders of those countries will do everything possible to prevent the threat of a third world war. I am somewhat optimistic about the changes that have taken place in Russian-American relations since Presidents Putin and Biden met. I hope that this meeting will pave the way for some kind of more constructive relations, with the understanding that each country will protect its own interests.

However, we must not forget that we live in the same world. Our planet is one for all. Now there is such a colossal arsenal of nuclear weapons in the world that this world of ours can simply fly apart if these weapons are used. Therefore, every state leader should have a sense of responsibility for what is happening not only in his country, but also for what is happening in the world. Of course, such provocative actions as those that took place in the Black Sea do not contribute at all to the growth of stability and confidence between states. Recognition or non-recognition of state borders, certain political statements that can be made about this – is one thing. But another thing is specific actions that can provoke a conflict.

E. Gracheva: A terrible situation occurred in Greece: at a monastery in Athens, at a meeting of the ecclesiastical court on the defrocking of a 37-year-old hieromonk who was accused of drug trafficking, he doused seven metropolitans with acid. I do not recall another such high-profile incident in the history of the Orthodox Church. What example should this set for others?

Metropolitan Hilarion: I do not recall another incident like this either. We, of course, express our sympathy to those hierarchs of the Greek Orthodox Church who got attacked during this incident. The person was defrocked, he filed an appeal, this appeal was rejected and he resorted to such extreme measures. This, on the one hand, can be interpreted as a gesture of despair, but, on the other hand, it shows that the person was deprived of dignity justly, because a man capable of such actions could not

bear the holy order.

Unfortunately, in every Local Church, hierarchs meet with situations wh ere the bearer of the holy rank is not worthy of it. I think that it is impossible to exclude such cases completely. We are currently doing a lot to minimize risks, so to speak: we are carefully studying the biographies of candidates, what they were doing before they decided to become priests. But still, it is completely impossible to exclude random, unworthy people from entering the ranks of clergy and even the hierarchy. Therefore, the Church has a disciplinary mechanism for exclusion such people from both the clergy and the hierarchy. Such people can be banned from the priesthood, deprived of their rank. I would very much like to hope that this particular egregious incident that occurred in Greece will never happen again in the history of the Orthodox Church.

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, aren't you ashamed to call on Orthodox people to get vaccinated? I can still understand our authorities, but I didn't expect this from a cleric of this level. I never would have thought that you would be able to encourage us to do such a stupid thing – to get vaccinated. The harm from the vaccine is huge. I'm amazed that you don't understand this.

Metropolitan Hilarion: Yes, I don't understand the harm of the vaccine. I was vaccinated myself. I have helped to vaccinate many people who are close to me. Thanks to this, they did not get sick. Thanks to this, the lives of many people around them were saved. I don't understand the harm of vaccination.

Moreover, I remember how, when I was a schoolboy, we were taken to get vaccinated. I still have traces of this vaccination on my forearm. I don't even remember what we were vaccinated against. I think we were told, or maybe we weren't told what the vaccine was against. But this all happened without fail. No one, as they say, "arose", no one argued. There were no anti-vaxxers in those days. They just vaccinated everyone, because that was the approach.

I think that now we all need to put aside our private opinions and listen to what the authorities and relevant medical authorities say, that is, specialists who understand this.

The situation in our country is still very unfavorable, and it is connected precisely with the fact that people are being vaccinated at an insufficient rate. We have talked about this many times on our programs.

People often come to me and ask: when will it all end? Why did God allow such a pandemic? A year ago, we couldn't give an answer, because we didn't have a cure, we didn't have a vaccine. We have it now. We can give a very simple answer to this question: the pandemic will end when we want it to, when people like you stop being stubborn and get vaccinated for the sake of yourself and your loved ones.

Another question on the same topic: On June 20th, on another episode of your program, you stated that refusing to get vaccinated is silly. In my opinion, this statement cannot be accepted. I believe that God created the universe and mankind. I'm not against medicine, but I'm against an ideology built on people's fears. I am 35 years old, I lead an active lifestyle, I have three children, I regularly use traditional medicine, I take care of my family. People are not plants in a greenhouse, and you are not a breeder.

Metropolitan Hilarion: Thank you for this question. It gives me the opportunity to remind once again that we are responsible, each of us, not only for ourselves and not only for our loved ones, but also for all those who come into contact with us today. The problem with the coronavirus is that this virus is transmitted from person to person, and unlike the AIDS virus, it can be transmitted simply through a simple conversation, not even a handshake. You'll stand next to a person, they will talk to you, and then you will get this virus.

If this virus is not dangerous for you, if you are 35 years old and lead a healthy lifestyle, then this is very commendable. But this virus can be dangerous for other people, and you can become a carrier of this virus. I constantly encounter situations now when people come to the priest to repent that they did not vaccinate themselves or their loved ones, thus becoming an involuntary cause of their death. They come and say: how can we live with this now? It's hard for me to say how to live with it. All your life you have to repent for the sin you've committed, and the sin is that you thought about yourself, rather than about other people. We must first of all think about others, regardless of what kind of lifestyle you lead, healthy or unhealthy, and what kind of medicine you use. Think about the people around you. To each of them, you can become a source of threat.

Question: Dear Metropolitan Hilarion, why is suffering of all kinds, both physical and mental, so cultivated in Christianity?

Metropolitan Hilarion: I think you don't quite understand Christianity correctly. Perhaps you don't quite understand the Christian teaching about suffering correctly. We don't cultivate suffering at all. We are

not saying that people are called to suffer, that they should suffer, that they should create conditions for themselves wh ere they will experience sorrow. On the contrary, we say that a person is called to a decent life on this earth and that we are called to create proper conditions for ourselves and for the people around us. That is why some clergy, including myself, are now actively involved in campaigning for vaccinations. We do it so that fewer people around us would suffer and die a painful death. We have no other interest in encouraging people to get vaccinated, other than to reduce the death rate, to ease people's suffering and to save some people from the painful death that, unfortunately, people die with.

When theologians say that suffering must be endured patiently, we are not cultivating suffering, but talking about how to treat it. Suffering comes to a person in one way or another: both physical and mental, in one situation or another. The whole question is how we feel about suffering. We can grumble, resent it, be angry, or curse everything around us. We can curse God, as some people do when they are suffering. However, we can learn to endure suffering with humility, so that this sorrow would become a kind of school for us. It will purify and uplift us spiritually. This is what Christian theologians usually say in connection to suffering, instead of ‘cultivating’ it.

I would like to conclude this show with the words of the Apostle Paul in the epistle to the Romans: "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." (Rom 8: 18).

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

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