Metropolitan Hilarion: Through common efforts we will manage to overcome the pandemic



Answering questions from an RT TV Company correspondent, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk shared his judgements on such socially painful problems as the continuing pandemic and information campaign against vaccination from the coronavirus.

- Your Eminence, your Instagram account is still blocked. What can you say about it?

- I think the account has been blocked because some group of people has swamped with complaints the leaders of the Instagram social network. I presume these were opponents of the vaccination, the so-called 'anti-vaxxers' who are now very aggressive. They are trying to attack me in many directions, for instance, they have sent questions full of aggression against 'The Church and the World' program, which I have presented for twenty years now at the Russia 24 TV channel. Therefore, I have no doubt that the present attack, too, comes from them. And why the Instagram leaders do not appropriately react to this attack is still unclear.

First, we received from Instagram quite a standard notice in English. It stated that the account was blocked and it may be due to this or that reason, while the enumeration also included an indication that we allegedly failed to react to some warnings; except that nobody had sent us any warnings.

And today we have received from Instagram a demand that I should sent a photo of my passport. I did it - no actions in response so far.

- You said that the account is blocked because of complaints from 'anti-vaxxers'. Why do they so much want that you should be blocked?

- I presume it were they who sent these complaints because I can see: the only so aggressively mooded a group now is precisely the 'anti-vaxxers'. And why are they so aggressive, why are their actions so well-coordinated is perhaps a question that is worth of a thorough investigation.

Overall, I think as the virus has come to Russia from abroad, so the campaign against vaccination is orchestrated from abroad as well. I have repeatedly expressed the opinion, including in my program, that the virus is a certain biological weapon. May be, it has developed naturally; may be there was a leakage from some laboratory, or, may be, all this has been made consciously to crush the world economy. Whether there is such a probability, let experts tell us.

Nevertheless, it is obvious that the virus has come to us from abroad, that is to say, it is a foreign product. And the vaccine devised by Russian biologists is our home product, our response to the challenge issued to us. The vaccine has been done to protect people. One may assume that the same forces that have thrown in the virus to us are interested in making the pandemic prolong in our country as long as possible so that as many as possible people may die, and precisely for this reason they are very active in carrying out the anti-vaccine campaign.

Pay attentions: those who are against the inoculation use the Russian mass media and television, and their views are reflected in Russian news agencies. And the whole anti-vaccination campaign is carried out in the vast expanses of Internet which is not controlled by us. Nobody of those who utter the most absurd, the most phantasmagorical theories concerning vaccination, beginning from allegations that vaccinated women will not be able to conceive to assertions that vaccinated people will live several decades fewer than those who were not vaccinated. This and similar nonsense is circulating now in Internet and, regrettably, many believe it. There are also those who consciously or unconsciously participate in the anti-vaccination campaign (those who behave so aggressively certainly participate in it consciously). Probably, not all those who are involved in this campaign are aware that the conductors of the anti-vaccination campaign are not located with us in Russia but outside it.

- A considerable number of people in Russia and in the world classify themselves as 'anti-vaccinators' even despite the pandemic. Many of them believe in various conspiralogical theories and shelter themselves under religion. What do you think why they do so?

- I am very sorry for them. I call upon my parishioners not to fish about in the information rubbish so abundant now in the Internet vast spaces. There is quite a reliable information offered by our medical doctors; there are obvious facts impossible, to my mind, to object to.

Some people say there is a risk of one's death after a vaccination, but we have not heard about the cases in which somebody was inoculated by any of the Russian vaccines and died because of it, but there are hundreds of people who die daily from the coronavirus in Russia. The number of those who died from it has already exceeded 140 thousand people.

And there are those whose death was caused by consequences of the endured disease. In Moscow, there was a remarkable priest, Archpriest Dimitry Smirnov. After Father Dimitry had had the coronavirus, he was paralyzed. In a phone talk with me, he related that he was completely helpless. A few months after Father Dimitry died. Clearly, his death was caused by the consequences of the disease but he is not among those 140 thousand who officially died from the coronavirus.

The number of victims of this disease is enormous: if we take the whole world, the number of those who died from the coronavirus is already past four million. So how more victims are to die to convince “anti-vaxxers” of the need if not to be vaccinated themselves then at least not to tempt other people - 500 thousand victims among people in Russia, a million? And in the whole world - perhaps 10 million or a billion?

People should preserve the soundness of judgement. There are numbers, there are facts, and the demagogy contrary to them should be ignored.

- Recently you said that those who resist vaccination would have to pray for forgiveness of their sin to the rest of their lives. This statement has provoked a stormy reaction and a lot of interpretations. Can you tell us in detail about what you meant?

- There is what I say and there is what is drawn out of my statements by the mass media and what is it to which a certain headline is fastened for people to react to it.

In my program I spoke about a man who came to our church and informed us that that he was an “anti-vexxer” and for this reason he refused to fulfil his elderly mother’s request to organize vaccination for her. As a result, this elderly woman died from the coronavirus and later the same disease killed her neighbour who looked after her. This man himself was infected and fell ill but survived. And now, coming to church, he asks, How shall I live with that? The man admitted his guilt; he realized that he became the unintentional killer of this own mother. In the program, I said that such people would have to pray for the forgiveness of their sin for the rest of their lives. I myself have seen such people, and they are many today.

I am told: why do you so actively call people to be vaccinated? Indeed, you have no medical education. And one does not have to be a medic to see what is happening around, in what agony people with the coronavirus die. They simply suffocate. It is a nightmarish death. Such patients cannot even say goodbye to their relatives, as the latter are not allowed to see them. Doctors see all that; we, priests, see that. Compared to what is happening, the anti-vaccination rhetoric seems simply absurd and even sacrilegious. That is why I am not shy of speaking, in both my programs and other public appearances: God has sent to us now an opportunity for getting rid of the coronavirus pandemic, so let us use this opportunity.

Parishioners often ask me: when will all this come to an end? When this pandemic began, we did not know when it will come to an end because we did not have an “antidote”. Now we have it - there are three Russian vaccines. If you do not like one, take another.

Some say that in creating the Sputnik V vaccine, ostensibly the biomaterial of an aborted baby was used, to which specialists from the Gamalei Institute have already answered. But even if you do not like Sputnik V, we have other two vaccines. Here you are, please get vaccinated. Let us now stop this bacchanalia around vaccination. Let us look around and see what is happening around us.

Now some say: As for me, I feel fit, I do not fear the covid. Even if it does not fear you, think about others: you yourself may not only get infected but also may become carrier of this infection. Let us suppose that you will be able to survive this disease or have had it asymptomatically while your mother, your grandmother, your grandfather, someone of your friends will be infected from you and die. Will you be not ashamed of living afterwards in this world?

This is what I meant when I said that those who have not been vaccinated or have denied others an opportunity for inoculating to become the cause of someone’s death would have to pray to the rest of

their lives for the forgiveness of their sin of unintentional killing.

- Some people think that vaccination is contrary to personal freedom, which prevails over responsibility before society. The state puts responsibility above. What does the Church think?

- I will express my own opinion. I think, when the point is personal freedoms in principle, we should protect them by all possible means. At the same time, when the point is the survival of a whole nation, when people die en mass from the virus, it seems to me that it is necessary to mobilize the whole country for overcoming the disease while being tough on those who, for some stupid or absurd reasons of their own, speak out against vaccination.

In Russia, vaccination is voluntary; it is the attitude of our state. At the same time, the state stimulates vaccination by the most diverse ways.

For some categories of workers, vaccination is obligatory. Why has this decision been made? Because there are those who work with the population, people pass through them and these people should be protected. I think it is a very proper and sober approach.

Vaccination has not become obligatory for all. Indeed, there are those who, for various reasons of medical nature, cannot be inoculated. But it seems to me that all who can be vaccinated should do it now - if not for their own sake then for the sake of others.

- How does the Church help with combatting the pandemic?

- We have reacted to it in accordance with the prescriptions of state bodies and sanitary services. The pandemic began at the time when we were preparing for the feast of Pascha, and the days from the Palm Sunday to the Bright Sunday are special in that in this period people flood to churches. At the instruction of the Patriarch, divine services continued to be celebrated in churches but the access for parishioners was limited and in some churched it was closed altogether. At the same time, Internet streaming was organized in many parishes. On Pascha, people worshiped at home - probably, it was for the first time in the history of our Church. We resorted to such unprecedented measures in order to save people’s lives.

Then the number of infected people began to fall; with time, vaccines were devised; vaccination began, and now churches are open. At the same time, the instruction that the Patriarch and the Holy Synod published in the very beginning of the pandemic remains in force: and recently, the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church particularly reminded us of the need to step up the anti-epidemic measures.

What are these measures? First, the observation a social distance in a church, obligatory masks for worshippers, disinfection of the communion spoon after each partaker, interim refusal of some traditional Orthodox ways of expressing the worship of God and veneration of saints, for instance, kissing icons. And in case of the kissing does take place, a church worker should rub the surface of the icon with spirits after each one who kissed it (certainly, in such a case, an icon should be placed under a glass icon case). There is a whole set of restricting measures which we seek to observe.

Unfortunately, not all the clergy listen to the voice of the Patriarch. Some ignore what the Supreme Authority says, while someone, voluntarily or involuntarily, join the “anti-vaxxers”, who are carrying out an active and aggressive campaign today against the vaccination. However, I think that most of the bishops and priests and the main part of our church people, do understand that it is necessary to observe the anti-epidemic measures.

I would like to express a hope that, through common efforts, we will manage to overcome this pandemic as soon as possible. I believe in the power of God and His mercy. But I also would like to believe that we all will behave reasonably, show responsibility for each other, take care of those around us, that all those who can be vaccinated will do it. The sooner it happens the faster the pandemic will be finished for us.

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