Metropolitan Hilarion: Alexander Nevsky combined wisdom of a state ruler with personal holiness



On September 18th, 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, Catherine! Hello dear brothers and sisters!

E. Gracheva: On September 12, a big holiday was held, and it had a national scale: the 800th anniversary of the birth of Prince Alexander Nevsky was celebrated. A Liturgy was celebrated at the Alexander Nevsky Lavra, which was conducted by Patriarch Kirill. A large memorial complex was opened in the Pskov region "Alexander Nevsky with his squad". What is the significance and relevance of Alexander Nevsky's feat today? How does the Russian Orthodox Church see this today?

Metropolitan Hilarion: Alexander Nevsky is a saint for the Orthodox Church. For the Russian state he

is one of the most prominent statesmen in its entire history. This is very important to remember, because a person rarely combines wisdom of a state ruler with personal holiness. And Alexander Nevsky had both.

This was a turning point in the history of Russia, in fact, the question for the Holy Rus' was simle: to be or not to be. Mongol hordes pressed Russia fr om the south, and crusaders came fr om the north and west. They wanted to destroy our cultural code and recode us in the Western manner and in the Catholic way. Although the challenges were very serious and the country was in real danger, Alexander Nevsky found the strength and courage to resist both the enemy coming fr om the west and the enemy coming fr om the south. He managed to rally the people, inspire the soldiers to fight to the bitter end, becoming a symbol of resistance and survival, a symbol of statesmanship and holiness.

It is no coincidence that it was this symbol that Peter I turned to when he was looking for a certain state, political and moral ideal for the new Russia that he was building.

It is no coincidence that Alexander Nevsky was remembered when the Soviet Union was attacked by fascist hordes. It is no coincidence that today there is both the state Order of Alexander Nevsky and the church Order of Alexander Nevsky. The state honors him as a commander, an outstanding ruler, and the Church honors him as a saint. His Holiness the Patriarch recalled this in his homily at the Alexander Nevsky Lavra. He reminded about the great responsibility that lies on people who are endowed with power, and that earthly power can be combined with personal holiness of a person.

E. Gracheva: Let's move on to international topics. In Montenegro, we are witnessing another political confrontation between secular and ecclesiastical authorities. During the enthronement of the Metropolitan of Montenegro and Primorye of the Serbian Orthodox Church, the hierarch accused the President of Montenegro Milo Djukanovic of organizing riots. Several thousand people took to the streets to protest against this enthronement. In response, Djukanovic said: "We have witnessed a great shame for the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Government of Montenegro, a shame unprecedented in the long history of the Montenegrin state, as well as in the entire history of Orthodoxy." Quite a big statement. What kind of shame is there in this case? What does Milo Djukanovic mean?

Metropolitan HILARION: I think President Djukanovic of Montenegro means that the Serbian Orthodox Church has once again placed its hierarch on Montenegrin soil. As at one time Poroshenko had a dream to create an "independent Ukrainian church", so Djukanovic has a dream to create an "independent Montenegrin church". Therefore, as president of this country, he supports not the canonical Church, whose parishioners are the absolute majority of the population of his country, but a certain schismatic group consisting of several adventurers who put on episcopal or priestly vestments.

In fact, it is a shame for Montenegro that it is governed by a leader who is unable to unite the population of his country, who works to divide it and to create conflict. It was a shame that the Serbian Patriarch, who came to perform the enthronement of the Montenegrin Metropolitan, could not safely reach Cetinje, where the enthronement was taking place, because Djukanovic's supporters put out people to prevent it. The patriarch had to travel by helicopter. There is a footage of him getting out of a helicopter, and the military is carrying shields in front of him and in front of the elected Montenegrin metropolitan, so that they will not be shot by snipers. This is the real shame of Montenegro, and the responsibility for this shame lies with the Montenegrin President, Mr. Djukanovic.

E. Gracheva: On September 16, a separate conference was held in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, which was devoted to how the Church should respond to the actions of the Patriarch of Constantinople. The conference was rather representative: Patriarch Kirill spoke at it, and representatives of other Local Orthodox Churches also participated. Does the Russian Orthodox Church have any fears that Orthodox people, ordinary parishioners, may simply turn away fr om the Church amid these church disputes, get tired of this kind of news about a conference where they discuss who is friends with whom and against whom?

Metropolitan Hilarion: It seems to me that a truly Orthodox person will never turn away from the Church. Only that person may turn away from the Church who has a superficial religiosity, who does not feel that the Church is a space wh ere God lives and works, who does not know how to see the reality of the Divine presence in the Church behind human reality.

The Church is made up of people. People come to Church with their own sins, passions, and problems, and, unfortunately, the clergy are also not free from human sins, weaknesses, and passions. Sometimes these human weaknesses and passions influence what we call ecclesiastical politics or ecclesiastical geopolitics, when certain Local Churches start quarreling among themselves, or when this or that person begins to assume powers that he does not really have.

In recent years, we have been confronted with the claims of the Patriarch of Constantinople to special privileges, special powers in the Orthodox Church, which are akin to the papal powers in the Roman Catholic Church. However, wh ere as in the Catholic Church such tradition with a papal system of governing the Church – when one person stands over the entire Church, perceived as the vicar of Christ, truly exists– then in our Orthodox tradition this has never happened. The Orthodox Church is a family of Local Churches, the Primates of which are equal to each other, even if there is a certain order between them, in which they are arranged when they jointly celebrate the Divine Liturgy. According to

this order, which existed until the eleventh century, the first Bishop was the Bishop of Rome, the second was the Bishop of Constantinople, and then the other Primates of the Local Churches.

After the breakdown of communion between Catholics and Orthodox in the eleventh century, primacy in the family of Eastern Orthodox Churches naturally passed to the Patriarch of Constantinople, but this was and remains the primacy of honor, not the primacy of power. When the Patriarch of Constantinople begins to exercise authority, to declare that he can interfere in the affairs of any Local Church, when he declares that he can redraw the borders of Churches and cancel acts and agreements of 300 years ago by his sole decision, then, of course, the Local Orthodox Churches do not agree with this.

That's what we talked about at the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour. This is what His Holiness Patriarch Kirill and the guests from other Local Orthodox Churches talked about.

E. Gracheva: Let us now discuss the news from Ukraine. Secretary of the Security and Defense Council Alexey Danilov called on the country to abandon the Cyrillic alphabet and completely switch to the Latin alphabet. At the same time, he stands for two state languages. The second, of course, should be, in his opinion, English, and from kindergarten: "We are talking about a means of civilized communication, which everyone should know." Do you think the English language will help Ukraine to integrate into the Western civilization that Danilov is talking about?

Metropolitan Hilarion: I think that such appeals probably belong to some kind of pre-election slogans. They are aimed at a specific audience and do not reflect the reality that exists in Ukraine.

Ukraine is a country wh ere people speak both Ukrainian and Russian. For both languages, the traditional font is Cyrillic, not Latin. Neither Russians nor Ukrainians have ever written in the Latin alphabet. I think that for many Ukrainians, such a transition to the Latin alphabet would be a culture shock. But the point is not in this, but in the fact that it is impossible to recode the cultural identity of the Ukrainian people, even if you try to translate the Ukrainian language into Latin.

Moreover, it will never be possible to replace Russian with English, because, as the experience of other post-Soviet countries shows,where Russian once existed as a second language, as a language of interethnic communication, people actually knew this language. And wh ere English is introduced, people do not speak it. To make sure of this, you just need to go to one of the countries of the former republics of the Soviet Union and see how they "speak" English there.

E. Gracheva: Let's continue the topic of fighting the Cyrillic alphabet and the Russian language. In the

Estonian Parliament, there is the Fatherland party, which recently presented a plan for the protection of the Estonian language. It is based on the de-russification of education in the republic. Why such fear of the Russian language, which we see not only in Estonia and Ukraine, but also in other countries of Eastern Europe? What is the reason for this fear? Is it justified?

Metropolitan Hilarion: In Estonia, Ukraine, and other post-Soviet countries, those politicians who advocate the eradication of the Russian language are essentially in favor of not having a Russian or Russian-speaking population in these countries. This is not just about the political choice made by these countries or politicians, but also about an elementary violation of human rights, because everyone has the right to speak their native language. Even if they live in a country wh ere this language is not the majority language.

I often cite Switzerland as an example. Switzerland has four official languages: German, French, Italian, and Romansh. Only a few villages speak Romansh, but it still has the status of an official language. Switzerland respects all languages, cultures and traditions that are part of the country's cultural identity and diversity.

It's the same in our country. If we look at how many languages the citizens of the Russian Federation speak, we have a national language of communication – Russian, but in Tatarstan they speak Tatar, in Ossetia-Ossetian, in Buryatia-Buryat and so on. Measures are being taken everywhere to ensure that local languages are developed, that they do not die, that they are taught in schools, but at the same time there is a language of interethnic communication that allows the people of our vast country to communicate with each other. English will never replace Russian.

And if we are talking about discrimination against the Russian-speaking population, about ousting the Russian-speaking population from Estonia, Ukraine and other countries, then it is precisely for this purpose that such steps are being taken and such initiatives are being voiced.

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

Metropolitan Hilarion: Thank you, Ekaterina.

In the second part of the Metropolitan Hilarion answered the questions of the viewers received on the website of the Church and the World program.

Question: Hello, Vladyka. Please explain why the Church calls the days of death of saints a holiday. How can we celebrate the Dormition of the Most Holy Theotokos or the Beheading of St. John the Baptist? Is it possible to consider the day when a person's head is cut off as a holiday? In my opinion, these are not holidays, but memorial days.

Metropolitan Hilarion: The Church has a concept of death that is very radically different from the generally accepted idea of death. We perceive death as a transition to eternal life. We celebrate the Dormition of the Most Holy Theotokos, because for Her this event, Her death, Her demise was the transition to eternal life. To understand why we celebrate this event, we need to look at the icon of the Most Holy Theotokos. It depicts the Blessed Virgin, Who is beautifully stretched out on Her deathbed, and next to Her stands the Lord Jesus Christ, Who holds Her soul, depicted as a swaddled baby.

This is, of course, a symbolic image, but it says a lot about the perception of death in the Christian tradition. For us, death is the transition to eternal life, it is birth to eternal life. When a person dies, his soul becomes like a baby, it begins its new journey in another kingdom, which Jesus Christ called the Kingdom of Heaven. If, of course, a person is worthy of this transition to the Kingdom of Heaven, and does not go to eternal torment for their sins.

When the Church commemorates saints, including those who died violently, like St. John the Baptist, it celebrates the feat of their lives. It shows the world these saints as a spiritual and moral example for our contemporaries, reminding everyone that death is not just the end of life, when life on earth ends, and then nothing happens after it. Death is the transition to eternity. Death is the crowning achievement of every person's life. When we glorify the saints on their memorial days, we celebrate, first of all, their feat of life, and also remind them of the purpose of Christian life and how a Christian should perceive death.

Question: Hello, Vladyka Hilarion. I am very interested in the results of studying the remains of the family of Tsar Nicholas II. Has our Church recognized their authenticity or not?

Metropolitan Hilarion: We are preparing for the Council of Bishops, which will be held in mid-November this year. At the Council of Bishops, we will discuss the authenticity of the Yekaterinburg remains. Numerous examinations that have been carried out, convincingly show that the remains found near Yekaterinburg are really the remains of the Imperial family. But in order for the Church to recognize this, it is necessary that all bishops get acquainted with the results of these examinations. I think that as soon as this meeting takes place, and it will probably take place at the Bishops ' Council in November,

the authenticity of the Yekaterinburg remains will be recognized by the Church.

But let's not rush to anticipate events. Bishops should have complete freedom to respond to the information they receive. So far, only a few people have this information. It is owned, in particular, by members of the Holy Synod, because we have already discussed this issue there. We listened to the report of the representative of the Investigative Committee and got acquainted with the results of expert examinations, but we did not make any decisions at the Holy Synod. This decision is of particular importance and will be made by the supreme governing body of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Council of Bishops.

Question: I appeal to you as a recognized expert in the study of the Holy Scriptures. My question may seem strange to you, but in the process of studying, I had a desire to read the Gospel in English. Which translation would be best to use? What can you recommend?

Metropolitan Hilarion: I generally think that reading the Gospel in English or any other language is a very good way to learn the language. Especially for a believer who knows the text of the Gospel well. Moreover, I always started with the Gospel of John, because there are so many repetitive words in this Gospel. Remember the very beginning of this Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. It was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made" (John 1.1-3), that is, the same words are constantly repeated: in Greek, in which the Gospel was written, in Russian, in which we read it, and also in English. Start with the Gospel of John. After going through this Gospel, you can then move on to other Gospels and to the epistles of the Apostle Paul.

If we talk about which translation to use, then there is a traditional old translation, which is called the King James Version. This translation is perceived by the English people today in much the same way as we Russians perceive the old Slavic language, meaning that the language of the King James Version is rather outdated – it is the language that was spoken by Shakespeare.

If you turn to more modern translations, I think that the most suitable version will be the Revised Standard Version. This is a proven translation, free from the trends that exist in many modern translations, wh ere the text is not just transmitted, but sometimes very significantly distorted due to certain preferences of translators.

I would like to conclude this transmission with the words of the Apostle Paul in the Epistle to the Hebrews: "Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will

see the Lord." (Hebrews 12.14).

I wish you all the best and may God protect you all.

DECR Communication Service

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