



DECR Chairman: Ukrainian authorities have every opportunity to stop the wave of persecution against the UOC



On November 20th, 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 from 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: This weekend, this Saturday, the Russian Orthodox Church and our program celebrate a big holiday: the 75th anniversary of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, on which the entire staff of the Russia 24 TV channel congratulates him heartily. I know that on his 65th birthday you presented the Patriarch with a rather creative gift - you released a documentary about him. Have you also somehow creatively congratulated the Patriarch this time?

Metropolitan Hilarion: This time I have prepared a new illustrated edition of the book "Patriarch Kirill. A Biography", which I wrote immediately after he had become the Patriarch. Then, in an updated form, this book was published in the series "The Lives of Remarkable People", and for the 75th anniversary I expanded it, supplemented it with information about what has happened in the most recent years: wrote about the visits of the Patriarch to various dioceses of the Russian Orthodox Church, and his activities as a bishop of Moscow.

The Patriarch has a very interesting life. I began telling it with a story about his grandfather and father. His grandfather was a confessor, went through camps and prisons, was in the Solovki prison camp, miraculously survived there, and then, having passed through the hardest trials, managed to pass on his Christian faith to his son-priest and grandson, who later became the Patriarch.

Then I talk about the father of His Holiness the Patriarch, about his childhood, his studies at the Soviet school - about how difficult it was for the boy, the only one who was not a pioneer and did not wear a pioneer tie, to resist the huge propaganda machine. From childhood, from his youth, he defended Orthodoxy: once, when he was at school, the teacher began to ask him about Darwin, about the materialistic worldview, and he answered the way he was taught in his family, as he believed. With this faith, he went through his whole life, through the Soviet years.

I am also telling about the teacher and mentor of the future Patriarch Kirill - Metropolitan Nikodim, who was an outstanding hierarch of the Russian Orthodox Church. At a turning point for the Church, Metropolitan Nikodim managed to ensure that episcopate would not disappear. Then there were Khrushchev's persecutions, and the Soviet government once again staked on the complete disappearance and withering away of the Church, and in order to help this happen, it was necessary to prevent the ordination of new bishops. For example, an old bishop would die, and no one would be appointed to replace him. Metropolitan Nikodim began to promote young people to bishops. How did he do it? He said that these people were needed for serving abroad, young promising people had to go there so that no one abroad would say that the Church was being oppressed in the USSR. They went abroad for several years, and then returned here and became bishops. This is how the future His Holiness the Patriarch went to Geneva, and then, after his return, became the rector of the Leningrad Theological Academy and a bishop at the age of 29.

I then talk about the next stages of the Patriarch's life: how he headed the Department for External Church Relations for twenty years, how he headed the Kaliningrad and Smolensk dioceses, and, of course, about almost thirteen years of his Patriarchate.

E. Gracheva: Vladyka, you have just returned from the United States. You met there with Russia's Permanent Representative to the UN Vasily Nebenzya. Recently, the UN Human Rights Committee **published a decision** clearly formulating their concern about the violation of the rights of believers of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. The same document instructs the Ukrainian authorities to guarantee the freedom of religion in Ukraine and to ensure that all cases of violence against believers would be investigated. Do you believe that the United Nations, which is reproached for not being able to resolve much bloodier conflicts, will be able to somehow change the state of affairs with believers in Ukraine?

Metropolitan Hilarion: I positively assess this decision of the UN Human Rights Committee, because for the first time on an international platform it was clearly stated that human rights are being violated in Ukraine. We know how this so-called "transition" of the communities of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church into a schismatic structure actually took place. In most cases, there was no voluntary transition, but there was a seizure of churches. Moreover, those seizures were accompanied by violence and beating, believers were expelled from churches, priests were expelled into the streets. Many churches that have been taken away from the canonical Ukrainian Church are now locked up, and those communities that were expelled - perform services in the open air or must pray in some kind of rented premises. Somewhere new churches have already been built to replace the captured ones, but all this lawlessness, which was happening under President Poroshenko, has not yet received due assessment of the international community. Now this assessment has been given, which is important in itself.

Will this change the situation in Ukraine? I think it depends primarily on the Ukrainian authorities. If they listen to what has been said at the UN platform, if they want to stop this wave of persecution of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, then they have every opportunity to do this.

E. Gracheva: Simultaneously with the UN document, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken made a loud statement: he named Russia among the countries that are distinguished by "systematic, flagrant violation of religious freedoms". On this list we are next to Myanmar, China, Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia. The US Secretary of State also refers to the norms of the US Religious Freedoms Act, adopted in 1993, and says that Russia allegedly does not comply with these norms. What standards are we talking about and what do you think about all this?

Metropolitan Hilarion: I think that one should ask representatives of religious confessions how they feel in our country. I am a member of the Interreligious Council of Russia. The Orthodox Church, Muslim

communities, Jews and Buddhists are represented there. Ask any of the representatives of the Interreligious Council of Russia: are they persecuted, oppressed, or are they content? I think that each of them will give a completely unambiguous answer: in Russia no religious freedoms are being violated. Traditional confessions are equal before the law, and each of them has the opportunity to develop unhindered.

Another thing is that we have, for example, banned some sects, such as Jehovah's Witnesses. But, firstly, Russia is not the only country where this sect is prohibited. Secondly, it was not banned for their religious activities: they were banned because of extremist ideas. If this is considered a violation of religious freedom, then we, for our part, do not think so, because all those measures are being taken in order to protect our people, first of all, from the manifestation of extremism.

E. Gracheva: Vladyka, over the past few days, the attention of the world community and the media has been riveted to the border of Belarus and Poland, Belarus and the European Union. There is an acute migration crisis. Germany, after negotiations between Merkel and Lukashenko, was able to smooth out the acute phase. There is hope that funding and humanitarian aid will come from the European Union. When I watch the reports of our colleagues from the border, they talk with migrants from Iraq, Syria, and ask what prompted them to go in search of a better life in the European Union. The migrants very reasonably explain why the Western countries and the United States are to blame for the fact that their children are without education, without food, without clothes, why are they forced to leave their homes, why there was peace under Hussein, and now they are here in the forests, hiding in tents with their two-month-old children. In general, when you listen to them, you believe them. They back up their position with arguments. How do you think, besides the fact that these people need to be fed and warmed, will it be easy for the EU countries to convince them that the West must not be blamed for their difficult situation?

Metropolitan Hilarion: I think that it will not be possible to convince them. And the reason for the global humanitarian crisis that gripped the countries of the Middle East is, first of all, the interference in the political situation of a number of Middle Eastern countries by Western powers, and above all the United States of America. I always view this situation from the perspective of a Christian presence, because our direct interlocutors in the Middle East are representatives of Christian communities. If we talk, for example, about the situation in Iraq, then there was a regime that the United States declared dictatorial and anti-popular. Whether it was like that or not – is a question that political scientists can answer, but the Christians who lived there under Saddam Hussein lived in peace. There were one and a half million Christians there. After the regime of Saddam Hussein was overthrown, terrorists raised their heads and attacks on the homes of Christians had begun. Christians began to be killed and expelled

from their homes. Most of them were forced to leave Iraq - from one and a half million now, at best, only one tenth of that number remains.

Therefore, the migration crisis that has now gripped many European countries is directly related to what the United States of America has been doing in the last two decades in the Middle East. This is a direct consequence of the imbalance that has occurred due to this outside interference.

E. Gracheva: Vladyka, this week it became known that the court had fined the Muz-TV channel for gay propaganda during a musical ceremony. We have discussed this topic with you. There is now an official court decision. Is a million rubles is a lot or a little? Is the punishment, in your opinion, severe or mild?

Metropolitan Hilarion: I do not know if a million rubles for a TV channel is a lot or not enough -, but I think that if gay propaganda is prohibited in the country, then any violation of the law should entail appropriate measures. We in the Russian Orthodox Church have always said that propaganda of unnatural vices causes irreparable harm, especially to children and youth. The law is on our side. Therefore, if the law is violated, then the perpetrators must be punished accordingly.

Here the question can be posed more broadly: what is or should be the educational role of television channels? If we look at the main content of what is shown on our television channels, various TV series, we will see that in these series neither a healthy lifestyle, nor healthy a family lifestyle are propagated. In these television series we will not see large families and happy children. Basically, all the stories are built around adultery, which is perceived by the audience almost as normative. I think that both the Church and society have a lot of questions about our television channels. First of all, these questions relate to what educational function they perform.

E. Gracheva: Thank you very much, Vladyka, for commenting on the recent news.

Metropolitan Hilarion: Thank you, Catherine.

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: I have just started reading the Bible. There are many incomprehensible and difficult passages. For example, what was the original purpose of the tree of knowledge in Eden - to tempt and seduce the first people? If God could have foreseen a certain sad course of events in advance, then why did He allow this to happen?

Metropolitan Hilarion: Judging by the question you asked, you have just started reading the Bible and have read the first few chapters of Genesis. These chapters tell how God created heaven and earth, created man in His own image and likeness, how God created the first married couple, Adam and Eve, and how they, being tempted by the serpent, disobeyed the commandment of the Lord and ate the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

Of course, when you read this story, you must understand that it is written in a certain symbolic language. Ultimately, it is about why a person is able to disobey God. You ask: why did God not prevent the fall, but look at your own life, at the life of the people around you. Do you and other people always fulfill the will of God? Or maybe, you sometimes decide to act against the will of God, because your human will tells you so?

If God prevented any evil deeds of man, then this would mean that we would not have a free will. We would be like puppets in a puppet theater. How do dolls move in a puppet theater? They are suspended by ropes. If you need to raise your hand, the string twitches. If you need to lift a leg, another rope twitches. If God wanted to create us as such puppets, then He would have created us like that, but then it would no longer be us, but some other creatures.

God gave us freedom. This freedom assumes that we have the right to choose between good and evil. Actually, the tree of knowledge of good and evil is a symbol of the fact that a person can walk the path of good, or maybe, if he wants, go the path of evil. God does not hinder him, because He does not violate the freedom of man. But the task and purpose of man is to fulfill the will of God, so that this image, according to which man was created, would develop, and the man would follow God's commandments rather than his own will which often contradicts that of the Lord.

Therefore, in the end, this story in the book of Genesis must be read in relation to oneself, so that we would ask the question: am I ready to do the will of God, am I ready to not eat of the forbidden fruit? Each person knows what fruit is forbidden for him, and for everyone it can be his own, it can be different.

Question: Neither in the Old Testament nor in the New did I come across such a commandment that

would oblige a believer to fast. Here is my question: observance of fasting for many days, abstaining from certain food on Wednesdays and Fridays, on other fasting days - are all these canonical prescriptions of a later time and came from the Church, or do they relate to the commandments of God?

Metropolitan Hilarion: First of all, I would like to say that both the Old Testament and the New Testament mention fasting. From the Old Testament I will give you an example of the book of the prophet Jonah, which tells how God wanted to punish the city of Nineveh for the many vices in which its inhabitants were involved. But when Jonah came to the inhabitants and denounced them on behalf of God, the people imposed a fast on themselves, they did not eat or drink anything for several days, God had mercy on the city and the punishment was canceled. This is just one example. There are other examples as well.

If we talk about those many-day fasts that exist now in the Orthodox Church, then, indeed, this is the establishment of a later time. When we read historical chronicles, for example, of the IV century, we see that there was only one long fast - the Great Lent. Moreover, in different parts of the Church it was observed in different ways, its length was different. Then, gradually, under the influence of monastic tradition, other fasts of many days began to appear.

As for the one-day fasts on Wednesday and Friday, they appeared at an early stage in the life of the Church in remembrance of the Savior's suffering.

Question: How should one understand the difference between inaction and trust in the will of God? For example, I need to perform a certain vital act, and I very well understand that until I start doing something, nothing will happen. However, when I turned to the priest for clarification, he advised me to trust in God and said that everything that should happen would happen according to His will, and not from my actions. How can this happen if I just sit back?

Metropolitan Hilarion: I suspect that you asked the priest a specific question, and he gave you a specific answer for a specific situation. Most likely, you had a choice of either acting or not, and the priest, having analysed the situation, suggested that you do nothing. Such situations happen very often. For example, a problem arises and we want to solve it as soon as possible. And if we wait a little bit, then this problem is solved, it may get resolved by itself.

This, of course, does not mean that we should always and in all situations sit idly by. The Lord is not calling us to this at all. If you read what the Lord Jesus Christ said to His disciples and His listeners in the Gospel, then He always called for an active course of action. He never said: sit back, wait for God to do everything for you, rely on the will of God. Yes, of course, the will of God acts in the world, but human will is also acting in the world. God is the Creator of this whole world, the Creator of the universe. He created all people. But He also calls people to be the creators of their own life, so that they cultivate the world around them.

When God put Adam and Eve in Paradise, He told them: cultivate this garden, take care of it, that is, He entrusted them with a specific task from the very beginning. And He entrusts each person with a task, which is expressed in the fact that a person creates a family, brings up children. A person has a job, a certain vocation. We carry out all this according to the will of God. And what we do against the will of God - these are our sins, vices, and the Church calls us to fight them.

I would like to conclude this episode of our program with the words of the Lord Jesus Christ from the Gospel of Matthew: “But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.” (Matthew 6.17-18).

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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