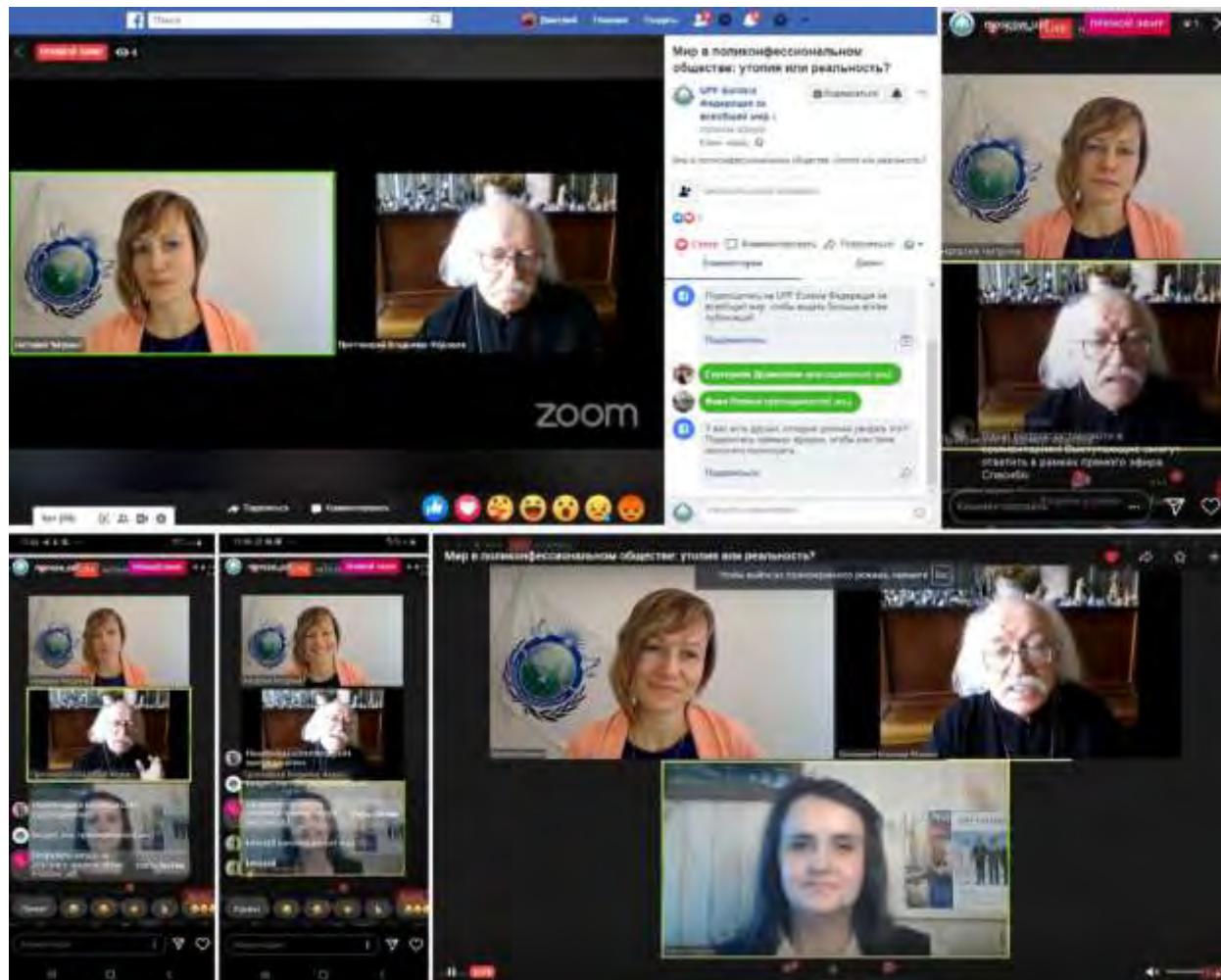


UPF St. Petersburg, Russia Interview of Orthodox Archpriest Vladimir Fedorov

Natalia Chigrina
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St. Petersburg, Russia -- A prominent Russian Orthodox cleric was the first guest in a series of online meetings to address inter-religious cooperation.

Archpriest Vladimir (Fedorov) was interviewed on May 20, 2020, as the Inter-religious Association for Peace and Development (IAPD), a UPF project, inaugurated the series of online meetings.

The event was titled "Peace in a Multi-Religious Society: Utopia or Reality?" It was broadcast on Zoom, YouTube, and the social networks Facebook, Instagram and Vkontakte (a Russian-language network). It is estimated that between 120 and 130 people participated.

Archpriest Vladimir (Fedorov) is a clergyman of the Prince Vladimir Cathedral in St. Petersburg of the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church. He is a candidate of philosophy, candidate of theology, professor emeritus of the Russian Christian Humanitarian Academy in St. Petersburg, associate professor of the St. Petersburg Orthodox Theological Academy, honorary researcher of the Russian Federation Higher Professional Education, scientific director at the Institute for Peacemaking Studies, Missiology, Ecumenism and New Religious Movements. For five years, he was a religious advisor to the World Council of Churches in Central and Eastern Europe. For the last 16 years he has been an associate professor at the Department of Psychology of Crisis and Extreme Situations at the Faculty of Psychology of St. Petersburg University. He is also the president of the Association of Teachers of Religion and Theology of Eastern and Central Europe. He was ordained a priest in 1978.

Father Vladimir was interviewed by Natalia Chigrina, secretary general of the Universal Peace Federation of Northwest Russia. She is a graduate of the Russian State University named after A.I. Herzen (St. Petersburg), Master of Religious Studies, independent researcher.

Below is the transcript of the interview.

Natalia Chigrina: Father Vladimir, in the beginning I would like to ask you some questions as a "warm-up." First of all, about your religious experience. Can you recall your first meeting with God?

Father Vladimir: This is such a difficult question. First of all, I want to thank the organizers of this meeting. Meeting people is a great joy. After all, if you are invited, it means someone needs you. Or, to

paraphrase the famous saying: "If you are invited, you exist."

As for the deep intimate topic -- about meeting with God -- I can answer that I grew up in a family in which we never talked about religion. I was baptized at the age of 5. My parents did not know about this: My grandmother invited a priest when we stayed with her. I grew up without any religious education.

I remember how at 15 I walked along the embankment past the university and talked with my friend. For some reason, we touched upon the topic of religion, and I said: "Well, why is it so? There is science, discoveries, scientists, to understand and explain things, so why is some mythological religion still needed?" I was then 15 years old; and at 16, 17, 18, I began to search for the meaning of life, knowing that I was baptized, and started visiting church. My faith gradually strengthened. I cannot name a turning point, but my search for faith lasted several years.

The topic you invited me to discuss is very close to me, because for almost 50 years I have been thinking about peacemaking. As a secular specialist, I studied mathematics, economics, psychology, then went to seminary. After seminary and the theological academy, I came to study theological thoughts about peace. In Soviet times the church did not appear in public space, and the only topic that was heard, not so much from the screens but on the radio, was the "struggle for peace." Representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church and many religious communities quite often appeared at such events, even international ones. Many today have a very negative attitude to this: "They were loyal to the Soviet regime, carried out a political order." Of course, this was a political order, but the fact is that the church responded with a deep conviction that peace is a value. In general, all religions actually consider themselves religions of peace and love. No religion claims to be a religion of evil and hate. There is a certain resource in the religious culture, faith, and spirituality of each religion, and this resource can and should help us in peacemaking. Such a collaborative experience can be very interesting.

Since 1977, after graduating from the theological academy, I had the opportunity to participate in various conferences. Just imagine -- disarmament roundtables! Scientists, military, politicians, representatives of Christian denominations, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism -- all together we discussed very serious issues: nuclear winter and so on. And all this is quite relevant today, although we do not have a nuclear winter but a pandemic.

I'll answer your question about a certain mystical experience and relations with God: It gradually matured in a teenager of 16, 17 years old and deepened in the process of studying science, psychology, theology and sociopolitical life, since the church actively participated in important political discussions.

I evaded the answer to your question, but moved on to why I am interested in being here. Thanks again for the invitation.

Natalia Chigrina: Thank you, Father Vladimir, for moving on to this issue, which we also consider important. We are ready to discuss this further and involve as many people as possible in the active discussion.

Given the diversity of your personal experience, as I understand it, today we will focus on cooperation at different levels and different areas; we will talk not only about cooperation between religions but also about cooperation between science and religion, and about solving global problems with representatives of different fields. And I think that we will also touch on the issue of cooperation between humans and God.

Let's start with internal things, if you don't mind. As St. Seraphim of Sarov said, "Acquire a peaceful spirit, and thousands around you will be saved." What do you think of this statement, and is it some kind of incentive for you? Could you explain how this phrase resonates in your heart?

Father Vladimir: This is quite a relevant topic, as believers often are accused of selfishness, as if they were looking only for their own salvation. In fact, religious culture opens a person's eyes, teaches that the meaning of our life is full of responsibility. The belief that we are created by God encourages us to seek our answer to the gift of life that we received. Responsibility is our answer to God.

In my opinion, the words "Acquire a peaceful spirit, and thousands around you will be saved" are accepted by followers of various religions. The secret of "cooperation with God" was revealed to me through Christianity. The world is created, but we are called to creativity, collaboration with God. When global problems arise, the response also must be global. World catastrophes, earthquakes, epidemics, wars -- all of them require solidarity and cooperation.

We must remember this: Many people talk about the conflict between religion and [science]. Ernst Haeckel, a natural scientist of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, said, "Of all the wars that peoples waged between themselves with fire and a sword, the religious were the most bloody."

Religious wars are scary. However, time has shown that he is wrong, since in the 20th century the two World Wars did not begin for religious reasons.

So the question arises: Is it a fact that hostility of one religion to another gives rise to conflicts? Many people think that religion is aggressive. Of course, it is not.

This is one side.

The other side: There are conflicts between religions, but conflicts also arise within religious communities. Within the same denomination, a conservative wing and a liberal wing are formed. And the conflict between them is so acute that it is more dangerous than the conflict between religions.

Take our pandemic situation. Almost all religious communities stopped public worship. Various forms of worship have arisen: worship through the virtual network and at a distance, in which parishioners stay outside the church. But there are people who said: "Why be afraid? God will not leave us." They are in a very serious spiritual conflict; this is the so-called conservative fundamentalist position. And this is not only in the Orthodox community but also in the Protestant and Catholic Churches. A letter of protest was signed by 10 bishops. The conflict exists.

When we reflect on the meaning of our existence and what our task of salvation is, we are concerned not only with personal salvation but also with what we could do to save others and how to help. Here's how one should understand the deepest idea that you need to start with yourself, with self-improvement, with the acquisition of meaning. Then there is hope that everything around you will turn out correctly and according to God's law. This is a very deep topic.

In this situation, a person, who feels scared to suffer, fearlessly goes to the temple, although he is told "not to go." At the same time, he forgets that he can harm another and infect him. In this real situation, all the deepest questions about how to be saved, and what for, what are the tactics and strategies of our spiritual life -- all this is very relevant.

Natalia Chigrina: I agree with you. I think that we are talking about salvation, but the very word "salvation" contains struggle and contradiction when two opposing sides arise. Could it be that unenlightened people have the opinion that religion itself lays the foundation for disputes and conflicts, since it fights with someone and saves or protects someone from someone?

Father Vladimir: This is a traditional argument that each religion considers itself to be true and is naturally at enmity with another religion and dissent. This is so; we believe that we have found the true path by entering a certain community, accepting its faith as our own, and formulating ourselves. Yes, we profess such a belief, but this does not at all mean that we are allowed to show aggression against dissidents. The history of humankind shows that gradually humanity nevertheless follows the path of moral progress.

Here's a simple story: We know from the school course what the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre of 1572 is: It was a massacre in which Catholics slaughtered 2,000 Huguenots in Paris, and about 30,000 in France. But after such monstrous events, humanity realizes that it is impossible to live like this, and a norm, a demand, appears: "Yes, there is another faith; yes, there is dissent. But one must be tolerant of this dissent." In other words, the concept of "tolerance" appears and is recognized as the norm. Encountering dissent, we must be tolerant. And here a whole group of concepts appears: freedom of conscience, pluralism, etc. There are many paths to the truth, but the ultimate goal is only God the Judge. The main thing is that after having chosen your way, you must try not to go astray. Your main task is not to think about your neighbor being wrong because he thinks differently. A Christian's duty is to engage in dialogue, testify, and share about his hope. But this does not at all mean that he should prevent another person from professing another faith.

Now in society there are laws that affirm tolerance as the norm. In Russia it is the same: For example, Peter I [Peter the Great] started some construction, and foreigners came to him. Accordingly, a decree is issued that they are allowed to build temples and create religious communities. This topic is especially relevant for St. Petersburg as a multi-confessional city. Or Catherine II [Catherine the Great], who invited colonists from Europe, issued a corresponding decree. Or in 1905, the martyred tsar, Nicholas II, issued the decree on religious tolerance. Thus, society is gradually approaching the need to regulate new requirements. And there is undoubtedly a certain progress.

Let us come back to the statement "There is a conflict between religions." Not only between them: There are conflicts in general. ... Our whole life is full of conflicts. For example, conflicts within one individual: I want this, still I have to do something else. These interpersonal, intergroup, family conflicts, conflicts between nations and states, inter-religious conflicts ... conflicts are all around. The clash of opinions, positions -- they need to be analyzed and investigated.

Thus, in the 20th century the science of conflict resolution arose. Undoubtedly conflicts need to be analyzed, to reveal the reasons. And most important is to find and give an answer -- what we should do so that these conflicts cease to exist? How do we prevent conflicts or resolve them when they appear? Peacemaking tactics and strategies are needed here, and accordingly the science of irenology [peace studies], that is, the "doctrine of peace," arises.

Regarding today's topic of the interfaith world, I want to add that it covers a very wide range of problems and conflicts. I hope that this discussion initiative is proof that today we need to move from the science of conflict resolution to the science of peace studies, that is, learn to live in such a way that conflicts do not arise, and that those that already exist do not become bloody. The experience of any religious community can be useful to others, and it is obvious that cooperation is necessary.



Natalia Chigrina: Let's get back to your personal experience. In your autobiographical article, you wrote that for you, there is no dispute about faith and knowledge. How were you able to reconcile these two areas within yourself, which many regard as irreconcilable? You wrote that you are not experiencing an internal conflict. You have resolved the conflict within yourself, and thousands can follow you. If you have resolved the conflict within yourself, then you can pass your experience on to other people. How were you able to reconcile religion and science? Later we will talk about how interesting it is to study religious organizations from the point of view of peacemaking: their theology, practice of social service, and practice of inter-religious dialogue. And now, please tell us about how this happened with you -- how were you able to resolve your internal conflict?

Father Vladimir: Thank you very much for such an important question. It happened so that everything was interesting to me, and the need for understanding the meaning of life gradually grew as I became familiar with religious culture, along with the realization that I was not a stranger to Orthodox culture. Very important were meetings with deeply religious scholars and philosophers.

But one moment I really can recall. It was not that turning [point], but it generated a powerful impetus. Already adult, in Germany, in the crypt of a Catholic cathedral, I saw a portrait of a nun and an inscription in several words. In Russian it would sound, "He who seeks the truth seeks God, whether he realizes it or not." I was completely struck by the simplicity and power of this statement. Even today it helps me in my life. I felt it subconsciously, but here this idea is expressed very clearly. What is a scientist? A scientist is the one who studies nature, tries to understand its laws. He does not invent the laws of nature; he opens them. He studies the structure of the world.

A scientist tries to penetrate the mystery. First of all, faith and mystery are inherent in both science and faith. And secondly, a scientist believes that there is truth, order and law. This is revealed to him to the best of his zeal. I see no conflict between faith, knowledge, and science.

Indeed, there arise conflicts between believers and non-believers, sometimes very serious. Conflicts between science and religion. The main thing here is to find such an approach, such images, that will help you to understand that you can avoid the problem.

There was one nun, a very famous woman, the first female professor of philosophy in Germany [Edith Stein]. She grew up in a poor Jewish family. Already in adulthood, after becoming an assistant professor, she adopted Christianity, adopted it so deeply that she entered a Carmelite monastery with a very strict

charter. When the Nazis came to power ... this is a very long story; in short, she died in a concentration camp. She is counted among the saints -- she is St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. She was engaged in philosophy, pedagogy.

These are her words: "He who seeks the truth seeks God." It is significant for both believers and non-believers. We are really looking for the truth, the social truth -- how to live in justice, in accordance with God's law. Believers and non-believers are able to understand and hear each other.

In society, believers and non-believers coexist, and naturally, believers of different faiths are on one side, and those who consider themselves free from religious faith stick to the opposite side. There should be a dialogue between them, built on the realization that we have a lot in common; but in fact, even within the same religion, even within Christianity, there are Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox, and within each denomination there are conservatives, liberals and fundamentalists. We must try to listen to each other, understand and conduct dialogue, and also be tolerant. Here the psychological approach is quite important.

In search of practical tips, tactics and strategies for peacemaking, we are trying to formulate the pedagogy of peacemaking. Technological science and spiritual practice can be helpful here: religious asceticism, the art of abstinence, humility, and so on. Collaboration is extremely important for all of us!

Today we are experiencing a pandemic. I have heard speeches by doctors from different countries. All of them are open to cooperation. We all know that only with mutual trust and cooperation is there hope for some early achievements in the fields of both medicine and peacemaking.

Recently I read a wonderful article by an Orthodox priest who wrote: "Yes, there's a pandemic, a virus ... but there's also a virus in our spiritual life." He had in mind the virus of fundamentalism, an extremist form of religious teaching. It is in every religion, and it is extremely contagious, easily clings to the consciousness of people, inspiring them with extremist interpretations.

The cooperation of religion and science invariably brings good results. It is no accident that in the 20th century new sciences arose, such as conflict resolution, peace studies, and others.

"From conflict resolution to peace studies" is the highlight of the third millennium. In my opinion, initiatives such as this show that we are groping for the right path. Unfortunately, some people still insist: "I will not talk to him, since he is a dissident, he is a sectarian, he is not ours, and he sticks to a different ideology." Here, a dialogue is needed.

That is why I am very glad that you launched such a project. I did not come here to teach, but to study. Talk with people who ask questions. Check what helps and what does not help us to overcome conflicts in real life. And conflicts arise everywhere -- in the family, between generations, between family members, in the office, but most importantly, the conflict is inside the individual.

Psychologist Edward de Bono wrote the book *Conflicts: A Better Way to Resolve Them*. The author adheres to Christian positions: "Two thousand years of Christianity have passed, but we still observe tragic events, blood is shed, conflicts erupt. ... How this is possible?" And he answers: "All this is because we forget that our mission is peacemaking. We, Christians, have been entrusted with this ministry. We are commanded this ministry: peacemaking." The same applies to politicians: A politician must be a professional peacemaker. This ministry is the mission of every person.

The Orthodox book *The Concept of Missionary Work in the Russian Church* says: "One of the five forms of the Christian Orthodox mission is reconciliation."

Natalia Chigrina: Father Vladimir, you answered the question perfectly well and also touched upon several topics. The theme is truly multifaceted.

I have a lot of questions in store. I will ask one question right now.

You mentioned the doctrine of the Russian Orthodox Church. It would be interesting to know if there is a document in the Orthodox Church that defines the types of inter-religious dialogue, such as the one with Catholics.

In the Catholic Church, the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue issued a document that describes these forms: the dialogue of life, the dialogue of action, theological communication, and the dialogue of religious experience.

The dialogue of life, for them, is a person's life when we live next to other people in neighborliness and goodwill. Dialogue of action is when we do something together for the good of society. The dialogue of theological communication is a place where representatives of different religions can meet to discuss

theological issues. The dialogue of religious experience is the level of heart in which people can discuss their spiritual experiences. This is a platform on which we, representatives of different religions and even non-believers, can talk about our special experiences at the level of heart.

Does the Orthodox Church have a document or a doctrine describing the types of dialogue or a plan for developing such a document?

Father Vladimir: I mentioned *The Concept of Missionary Work in the Russian Church*. "Social Doctrines" is a very serious and comprehensive document which touches upon all these points, and *The Concept of Missionary Work in the Russian Church* also. There is such a document, "Attitude to the Non-Orthodox in the Orthodox Church." In addition, there are several documents about dialogue. For example, the Russian Orthodox Church participates in dialogue with Jews, Muslims, and holds general inter-religious meetings. Of course, there is no fundamental set of formulations and concepts like in the document of the second Vatican Council. But in any case, the church takes an active part in inter-religious meetings.

My interest in missiology is precisely related to the fact that I understand missiology as an analytical discipline, including conflict resolution, peace studies, and theological dialogue.

There are quite a few opponents of even such popular values as tolerance. In 1995, Resolution 5.61 of the UNESCO General Conference of November 16, 1995, approved the Declaration of Principles on Tolerance. In the 2000s, our university also had a tolerance program led by Professor Alexander Asmolov. But it was not fully realized. Then the state program "Tolerance in Society" was introduced in St. Petersburg. At the same time, tolerance is perceived negatively in the mass consciousness. Even Patriarch Alexy II, before his death, speaking at a meeting of the Moscow clergy, argued that tolerance is a liberal Western value and it will destroy our society. I was terribly upset, because I am not just a supporter, I am a preacher of tolerance, and I think that without it the society has no future.

Patriarch Kirill, at a meeting with the Armenian patriarch, said: "Tolerance is a passed value. Our supreme ideal and value is love, and tolerance is a passed stage." And I was happy, because "passed value" means that you need to go through this stage. A hateful and intolerant person must necessarily go this way, become tolerant, and then he will be rewarded with love. If we are intolerant of dissent, it is a disaster. But life shows that unfortunately now there are a lot of negative manifestations – the fruits of intolerance.

Natalia Chigrina: Now I would like to move on to the questions of our audience.

Maria Nazarova (president of UPF-Russia): Thank you very much, Father Vladimir. The interview was very interesting and informative. It caused a wide response and a lot of questions.

Here is the question that collected the most likes: Is it possible to practice several religions at once?

Father Vladimir: I think this is unnatural. However, it depends on the religion. Recently we heard about a "civil religion." ... For example, many say that Orthodoxy is a religion. But this is not so. Religion – it's Christianity with different confessional traditions. One of its trends, the East Byzantine tradition, was fixed in the concept of "Orthodoxy," although Orthodoxy is a much deeper concept. There is a lot of confusion here. In fact, the traditions and norms within each denomination strictly warn against mixing. And deviation from one's faith is unacceptable. But the question is: Can we communicate with people of a different faith?

For example, is it possible to pray together with Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox? I will answer that, of course, Protestants can read the Gospel with Catholics; why not? After all, we share the Christian faith, although we belong to different traditions and churches. Of course, it is possible.

The fact is that there has long been a rule: You cannot pray with non-Orthodox, you cannot pray with heretics. But what is behind this rule? You cannot pray a heretical prayer! And if both read the "Our Father" and both recognize our Heavenly Father, I believe that [prayer] is possible. Of course, mixing religious faiths in principle is unnatural. Therefore, there are limitations. And the restrictions on the degree of communication, whether it is possible to conduct a dialogue, whether it is possible to drink tea together, or help together during a flood, or if you need to produce a certificate. ... Or during a pandemic, consider what is there on the mask -- a cross or something else. ... You can discuss this issue a lot. This is not mixing. For example, a Christian is fond of yoga, not professing Hinduism, but simply performing a series of physical exercises; there are many groups of people doing yoga -- this is completely different. This is not mixing of faiths.

Maria Nazarova: Do you agree, Father Vladimir, with the opinion that the statement about the truth of a religion on the part of its followers, as well as the falsity of other religions, is part of the religious beliefs inherent in almost all religions? Do you think this could be considered propaganda of religious

superiority?

Father Vladimir: No, of course. Respecting your faith is a natural thing. ... I have chosen faith for myself as the true one, and I am afraid that if I go the other way, I will stumble because this will be not a salvation path. This is quite fair. It seems to me that the law on freedom of conscience is violated very often when some religious communities are declared extremist without any proof.

The trouble is that we do not have professionals who can correctly and objectively judge what goes beyond the limits of religious norms and what does not. Therefore, there are many unjust trials today, in which individuals and communities are unfairly condemned for religious extremism.

Short questions

Question: Your favorite season?

Answer: Autumn.

Question: How many languages do you speak?

Answer: I'm making mistakes even in Russian. ... I made reports in English, German and even Italian, but I could not answer questions in the same language.

Question: Which saints are you following?

Answer: There are a lot of saints whom I esteem. Well, honestly, there is one Catholic saint – St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross is very close to me. Among the Orthodox, it is Mother Mary of Riga, numbered among the saints in the Patriarchate of Constantinople. She is part of our culture. She has been quoted quite often recently.

Question: If we talk about spirituality and morality, how can the church play its role in enlightening the younger generation?

Answer: This is a very important issue. Religious education is a debatable topic. What is being done today does not seem ideal to me. Education is extremely necessary, but in the form of churching, but in no case clericalization. Churching is not the art of placing candles but the ability to understand the meaning and significance of the church, for a human to feel like a cell of the body of Christ, and the desire to serve God. To know the truth, which is God.

Note from UPF: Any successful world strategy must take into account the spiritual dimension of a human being, his or her experiences and interactions.

With this series of meetings, we want to promote inter-religious dialogue and the exchange of views between world religions and religious organizations. We believe that through such dialogue we can actively overcome various world problems: terrorism, wars, conflicts, etc. Religious leaders have every opportunity to solve the problems of human society and can play an important role in reconciliation and building a culture of peace. For this they possess moral authority.

Moreover, believers' understanding of human rights is not limited to secular concepts. Fundamental here is the principle that humanity is one family under God. Religious leaders can help in reuniting divided communities and combating humanity's ailments and trials.

Religious leaders are a storehouse of wisdom, experience and spirituality, which our society lacks today. They represent a unique, valuable resource for achieving a just and peaceful world.

(Translated from Russian by Liudmila L. Sokolova.)