

# “We need something else now. We need holiness...”

Interview with Alexander Filonenko  
(in Moscow, Russia)

Nowadays we often hear about “traditional values”? What does this concept mean and what is behind it?

“Traditional values” are a construction that operates very differently in different contexts and situations. To me, it is particularly interesting and important to analyze how the language of safeguarding traditional values is applied in today’s political, social, and religious context. If we take a closer look, we will see that, regardless of creed, regardless, it seems, even of the region of the globe, communities are divided not by worldview, not by the type of values, but on much deeper grounds. This is the division between people who defend “traditional values” and people whose position is much more difficult to define sociologically and politically – I call them “witnesses.” People who testify about the experience of meeting with Christ. These two types of people are found inside any parish, be it Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox.

I am from Ukraine, and the Ukrainian crisis for me personally exemplifies this deadlock, this division of parishes. If in Europe and in America this division is peaceful, in Ukraine it has led to a real conflict. In Ukraine, it has become impossible to say that these are just two ideological positions; there is something deeper. So this is why we need to criticize tra-

ditional values: of course, the idea of values is not terrible, but we live in strange and terrible times, when the discourse of defending traditional values poses a threat. A threat inside the church, inside each parish.

The second thing to add to the discussion on “traditional values” is that the people defending traditional values really operate in a modernist secular matrix: they postulate what there *is* and what there *ought to be*, a moral ideal, essentialist and proper. In fact, it’s vulgar neo-Kantianism. It turns out that there is no one more secular in the church than the defenders of traditional values. Paradoxically, the bearers of traditional values are the most secular members of the community, who are concerned about the ideal and a certain set of norms and values. And so it seems to me that the phenomenon of a community defending traditional values is an example of secular communities in a postsecular context.

**Is there any way to have a positive, constructive conversation about traditional values? Or do we inevitably enter into the space of ideology and geopolitics and begin to protect something from someone?**

Positive examples? In 2013, a group of curators gathered to prepare a European exhibition in which Orthodox and Catholics could testify together to the beauty of Christianity. I remember a very revealing episode at a gathering with fellow curators, during which we were deciding about the topic of our next exhibition. We wanted the exhibition to be about the hottest, the most pressing topic of today. Together we decided to make an exhibition about the family. But even as we had reached consensus on this topic – the family is really very important, it is a traditional value – when we began to talk about how to develop the exhibition, how to offer a story, it turned out that immediately there were two positions. For me, these are the positions I was talking about above.

The first position was this: let’s talk about the fact that the family is being destroyed. Let’s demonstrate through sociology, through the demographic situation, how rapidly the institution of the family is being destroyed. Further, let’s show that the church is concerned and prepares protective documents and carries out some defensive actions. The logic was clear: something is disappearing, we are protecting it.

Then there was the second position. One of the curators said, “Look, if the family is breaking down, it is unlikely that Christians are those in the community who are able to protect it, and it is definitely not interesting to tell anyone about this, because if we start to protect the family, we have lost in advance.” It’s much more interesting to look at this situation differently. First, a family that disappears and a Christian family are different things. And it is bad that Christians themselves do not understand the difference between family and Christian family. Today, when people talk about the traditional value of family, they usually mean a very modern family, a nuclear family – father, mother, and children – no one mentions grandparents, grandmothers, the family home, and so on. As a rule, we are dealing with a situation where Christians protect the family, but it does not matter to them that it is not a Christian family.

For Christians themselves, we need to better understand the novelty of the Christian family. Why is it beautiful? And if it is beautiful for us, then we should have an exhibition to show that even if the Christian family is disappearing, even if there are two left in the world, we should show it to everyone so that people can see whether it’s attractive to them or not. The only way to talk about Christian values is to show their attractiveness, and a person can freely take a position in relation to this attractiveness. For me, that’s the way to bear witness.

I am very suspicious of all these attempts to defend tradition, because this position is not actually church-like. The problem with the Russian Orthodox Church is that it constantly reacts. The position of the Russian Orthodox Church in the public today is as follows: an event happens – the Church reacts. People hear nothing but the reaction of the Church and they think that is the way it should be. But for me personally, it doesn’t matter whether the Church reacts or not. It’s important to me that she bears witness. The notions of bearing witness and of reaction are different. Today’s Church doesn’t bear witness, and that’s the problem.

How often do we hear the Russian Orthodox Church speak in public about the beauty of Christianity, which is beautiful for the whole world, not just for Christians? For example, the canonization of Mother Teresa by the Catholic Church was such a testimony. It’s not just an avowal of holiness within one’s church, it’s an offering for everyone where people can’t avert their eyes, no matter who they are – atheists, skeptics, Mus-

lims, Buddhists. At such moments, people understand that before them is the testimony of the beauty that Christianity offers. That's what witness means to me. And the question of liberalism or conservatism is only secondary.

**What is your attitude to the discourse of traditional values as it exists in Russia and as it is broadcast abroad by the Russian Orthodox Church, including in the Ukrainian context?**

I am from Kharkiv, Ukraine, and I am a parishioner and member of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. In a situation where members of one and the same Church kill each other, it is impossible to talk about values. Today traditional values are protected by tanks and they lead to the murder of parishioners of one and the same Church. You see, in the conflict in Eastern Ukraine there are not two different churches, because on the one side you have a metropolitan and on the other side you have a metropolitan, and they belong to the same church and meet at the Council in Moscow.

When, for example, in Crimea, the metropolitan of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate blesses the missiles aimed at Kiev, it seems normal for the Russian community, because everything should be blessed. There are missiles in Crimea, why not bless them? And what does the press service of the Moscow Patriarchate do? It reports in all the news outlets that missiles are blessed and that in case something happens they will reach Kiev. For me, as a member of this Church living in Ukraine, that is a somewhat strange position. There is a patriarch who, on the one hand, wants to embrace the entire Slavic world, and on the other hand, he does not remember his parishioners in Ukraine at all. He doesn't remember them in public. He does not talk to them, maybe he prays for them, but the Ukrainian Orthodox who are faithful to the Russian Orthodox Church know nothing about it. For me, this is not just a psychological problem or a particularity of this patriarch, it is a much more fundamental situation. We have a situation of numbness, when the conflict within the church has reached a point that there is nothing to talk about. We need something else now. We need holiness.

This very conflict – this very division – I see it all over the world. It’s not specific to Ukraine. It’s not specific to Russia. The horror is that this is the specificity of all Christian parishes. We see these divisions everywhere. Even in Europe, only more civilized. In Europe, at least to my experience, the different camps still talk to each other. One part of the parish goes to demonstrations in defense of the family, against abortion, against gays, and so on, and the other part of the parish says: strange people, well, let them go, it’s their choice. I’m not going to go. I will go to the canonization of Mother Teresa. That is, whereas in Europe there is still a space of tolerance, where people can coexist and accept a situation of disagreement, here in Ukraine we are facing a much more fundamental conflict from which demons are born.

The Russian situation is exactly the same as in Ukraine and I would like to comment on it as a member of the Orthodox Church. Five years ago it would have been absolutely impossible to have a section called “The spiritual and moral security of the state” at the Christmas Readings.<sup>1</sup> It is completely incomprehensible to me how this is possible. That is, it is impossible for a Ukrainian to imagine that the Russian Orthodox Church holds a conference with such a section. And of course, this section is dedicated to the protection of traditional values. But these values are unknown, are alien to me. This section at the Christmas Readings, I take it as a kind of a marker: does the Russian Orthodox Church perceive of itself in connection with the issue of state security? Whose state?

The matrix of church-state relations in Ukraine is completely different from Russia. In 2014, one analyst from the Ukrainian Orthodox Church said that for him the most important result of the Maidan<sup>2</sup> is that it ended a situation in which, for all these years, the Orthodox Church has been too close to the state and has not noticed society at all. The situation of a weakened state and a strong society, as it is today in Ukraine, leads to confusion in the Russian Orthodox Church, not because it does not have a position, but simply because it has never seriously talked to society. The Russian Orthodox Church believed its partner in conversation was the

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1 The biggest conference of the Russian Orthodox Church organized every year in Moscow.

2 The revolution in Ukraine that happened in 2014 and led to a serious deterioration of relations between Russia and Ukraine.

state. As soon as this partner disappears, it's as if the whole public space of the church disappears. This is the Ukrainian situation. In Russia, it is the opposite. The partner is interested, and there is a very serious conversation between the state and the patriarch. The public discourse of the church is determined by its dialogue with the state, not with society.

**You mentioned that this division inside single churches is not limited to the Russian or Ukrainian situation. What about Europe?**

As far as Europe is concerned, I have had the privilege of giving lectures all over Italy for several years. I saw many different parishes and in all of them I got the sense of an internal division between those who bear witness and those who react. For example, once I gave a lecture on the new martyrs of the Russian Orthodox Church in the south of Italy. After my lecture, an old lady came up to me and said: "Thank you for reminding us tonight what kind of fathers' children we are." That was amazing! Imagine: here comes a man talking about Siberia, about the Gulag, about people she is hearing about for the first time in her life, and she realizes that she is reminded of her own fathers. To me, this is the point of testimony that allows us to come together today. When we are not talking about ourselves, our identity, our concerns, our traditional values, but about those whom we love. And it turns out that this love is shared. That's one path I'd like to better understand and explore, both politically and socially. This is essential for Ukraine today, and maybe not so fundamental for Russia.

I can also say the following about Europe: For many years people have been talking about the crisis of Europe and about the role Christianity in European history. Many people today describe the crisis in Europe as a situation where the church has to make decisions about values, has to protect and defend. As if the identity of the church were linked to its ability to defend itself. It seems to me that the contribution of Ukraine and Russia to the European debate is significant, because thanks to what is happening in our countries, Western European Christians can learn that the position of defending values is not safe for the nature of the church. The church ceases to witness, and for many people it becomes simply an institution that is defensive, conservative, and reactionary.

**Are the experiences of Ukraine and Russia somehow connected? Or are these two completely different stories within the same church?**

The history of Russia and Ukraine is one story. These are not two or three different stories, they are different plots within the same narrative. I mean, this is essentially the story of the post-Soviet person figuring out his life. In Ukraine that same post-Soviet person somehow discovered the theme of human dignity. Not because there was a human rights campaign, not because we held more conferences, but because a person was put in a situation where he was deprived of everything and they were going to take away his dignity. He may not have thought about dignity until that day, but when he found himself in that situation, he realized that he was ready to stand there until death in order to preserve his dignity. What we saw in winter at the Maidan is really a rediscovery of the theme of dignity. And it is a surprise – when the most cowardly person suddenly finds out that such a theme exists. Ukraine in this sense has taken the path of rediscovering the theme of dignity and reopening the issue that your existence is seriously connected with the possibility of openness to the world.

In Russia there was resentment. This is quite obvious to me. The solemn speech of the president of Russia regarding the annexation of Crimea<sup>3</sup> was terrible for me not only because Crimea was annexed, but because I saw Russia's entire political discourse falling into resentment. That is, until that point it was obvious to me that there were a variety of discourses in Russia. Political positions, something else, but for me this famous Kremlin speech was a sign that the state had made a choice. It went the way of resentment.

Since the Russian Orthodox Church has a strong relationship with the state, it could not avoid this position. The patriarch was absent from Putin's Crimea speech. Interestingly, Russians read this as if he was sick. And there was no comment on where the patriarch was. As if Russians weren't interested in why there was no patriarch at the historic speech. For Ukrainians, it was a sign of optimism, as if the patriarch wanted to

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3 The speech of the president of the Russian Federation on 18 March 2014. The full text of the speech is available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603> (accessed 19 May 2020).

say that he did not agree. A small ripple went through Ukrainian society: they said, look, for the first time the church distinguished itself from the position of the state. But then it became clear very soon that this was not the case; the Russian Orthodox Church took certain steps to confirm not only its loyalty, but also its agreement with this position of resentment.

The situation of the Russian Orthodox Church today is different from the situation during the Soviet Union. In the Soviet Union, the Church was loyal, but it did not agree. It is impossible to imagine that at the time a religious person would talk about the new martyrs and simultaneously praise Stalin as a father, patriarch, and bearer of traditional values. Such a position was unimaginable in the Soviet Union. You were on the side of the Church, or you were defending some Soviet narrative. What happened in Putin's Crimean speech was the combination of the Red and the Orthodox myths. This was of course not entirely unheard of inside the Russian Orthodox Church, but it had not been mainstream. Now it has become mainstream.

I am not one of those who believe that a close relationship of church and state is a mortal sin. Relations with the state have always been difficult for the Orthodox Church. The problem is that today there is no relationship with society and the Church's only connection to society is its attitude of reaction to what is happening.

**But why is the position of “protecting values” so problematic? There are values, they are disputed, and they need to be protected so that they can be passed on to subsequent generations ...**

Values do not need to be protected in order to be passed on to subsequent generations. That's not how values are transmitted. We must not concentrate our energies on the alleged crisis of values, but instead find the place from which these values are resurrected. The defenders of traditional values are trying to protect what they have, but that is not enough. In my opinion, in the current situation, we have only one way. To return to the place values come from. It's not a way to protect values, it's a way to reproduce them. If we need family in society, we don't need to protect it. We need to return to the place where it was born.

## Where is this place?

Exactly! Now that's the beginning of a real public debate. For example, Fukuyama's discussion of trust in his famous book: how is trust built?<sup>4</sup> Some believe that trust, memory, and values are formed, first of all, in the relationship of the child and the mother, who then transmits these values to the relationship with the father, the family, society, and so on. Some think it's friendship. I believe that the Church as a witness of Christ is an invaluable place for society to revive the value of trust. Church is the place where values are produced. They are made there. Not because Christians impose their worldviews, propagate their ideas, and defend their values. That's not what this is about. Christians live in such a way that in some cases their lives become attractive to non-Christians and as a result Christian values penetrate into the public sphere. That's what we saw in the case of the Nobel Prize for Mother Teresa of Calcutta. That is, maybe the majority of people in the world do not even know from what religious order she is, how she lives, what she prays, they have not read theological books. But it's obvious to everyone that they're dealing with some kind of beauty that is universal. This is the universality of the saints, their ability to transcend confessional boundaries. I mean, saints are saints to everyone. The experience of holiness is penetrating even for atheists. The Church today is facing two possible ways forward: either the Church returns to the revival of values, by which I mean starts to bear witness (first of all through education), or it continues in its defense of values, which is what we are mostly seeing today.

The problem with the focus on the protection of traditional values is that it remains unclear what these values actually are. They are traditional, so do they come from the past? But which past? Shall we return to Kievan Rus? Well, that's a long way off. If we speak about defending traditional values, we surely need some kind of lived experience of these values. So maybe go back to the past Soviet experience? Isn't the code of the builders of Communism a crypto-Christian product, isn't that the proof that not everything was so bad in the Soviet Union? Today's defenders of tra-

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4 Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

ditional values in Russia are obliged to combine the Soviet and Christian narratives, otherwise they are deprived of the opportunity to appeal to lived human experience. Logically speaking, this is absurd, but from the point of view of the program of protection of values it is the only possibility.

**What do you think about the dialogue between different faiths? Can values and their protection become the basis for new ecumenical interactions? Or do the same problems arise here? And what could become the new agenda for such interaction today? That is, what is the alternative to “protecting traditional values” in the context of ecumenical interaction?**

I frequently participate in interfaith dialogues. When representatives of the Catholic, Orthodox, and Greek Catholic communities in Ukraine meet, there is always the difficulty to decide what we are going to talk about, what will be our agenda? As a rule, these talks were about what separates us: how we differ in our teachings, how our attitude to the Pope differs, what's different about our understanding of history. The agenda was usually dictated by some challenge that we must respond to. But at one point we realized that we have an abyss of difficulties, we will not work them out at one conference, not even at ten or a hundred conferences. So what can we give to each other? Something that would be valuable to each of us? The answer was: the saints of our traditions! So we started to build the agenda of our meetings on this basis: let's look at the best that there is in every tradition and confession. This is the experience of the saints. And it turns out that when everyone talks about what makes him or her alive, personally, it's important for everyone. It was at these meetings that we discovered holiness as a lens for examining problems.

So for me, there are two types of interfaith meetings. There are conferences that discuss the defense of something, conservative groups that find out how exactly we are in trouble, how the world is trying to hurt us behind the scenes. This is one kind of interfaith cooperation. I'm not interested in it. For me the second position is attractive – when I as Orthodox listen to what Catholics say about what they love. When they, in turn, are not interested in what I think of the crisis in Catholic theology,

but when they are wondering what I think of Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh (Bloom).

I don't think there are conferences where these two types of people meet. And that's a problem. It turns out that there is a great deal of separation between these communities. They no longer have anything in common, no shared space. It seems to me that the problem today is not to determine the differences – liberal, conservative, traditionalist, fundamentalist – but to determine the subject of our common contemplation. Not the subject of our common politics, but the question who the saints are for us.

For me, one of the strongest public gestures of the Russian Orthodox Church was the canonization of the new martyrs in 2000. We had a little more than 300 of our own Slavic saints in the Orthodox Church. Three hundred and something at the beginning of the 20th century! Since 2000, the Russian Orthodox Church has canonized more than 1500 saints.<sup>5</sup> Doesn't it mean something big to the life of the Orthodox Church that the number of saints honored in its calendar has increased by five? It must mean something! If the Church canonizes, it is up to us to strive to understand who these people are. To learn their names, learn what they looked like and how they bore witness. In the past, canonization in the Church usually happened in the opposite way: whenever there was persistent public veneration of a person, the Church eventually recognized this person as a saint. In 2000, the opposite happened. The Church canonized over 1,500 people with an offer for all of us to become familiar with them. And what do we see today in the Church? Strange as it may seem, the defenders of traditional values don't look at them!

For me, the opportunity to look at a martyr's experience is the opposite of searching for and defending traditional values. They were all people who were certainly traditional, but they did not defend traditional values, they simply lived a life that was so beautiful even in unbearable conditions that this life could bear witness to faith in spite of hell. So even in hell, this

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5 In 2000, the Russian Orthodox Church canonized a new group of saints – new martyrs who were killed or persecuted after the October Revolution of 1917. See Karin Christensen, *The Making of the New Martyrs of Russia. Soviet Repression in Orthodox Memory* (London, New York: Routledge, 2019).

testimony was available, and so the Church survived. The Church did not survive because she was defending traditional values, but because she bore witness to the beauty of faith. When we talk about the new martyrs today, people immediately say: “Christ said, I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” What does it mean, the gates of hell shall not prevail against it? If you ask people what this means, the typical answer goes like this: there was a Church, the state struggled with it, the Church withstood the attack of hell during the whole 20th century, and now this attack has come to naught. This is the triumphalist tale. Well, I tell you: hell doesn’t attack, the gates stand where they stand. What does it mean, “the gates of hell shall not prevail”? Gates don’t have an engine, they are not moving. And it is clear that Christ means the opposite, that there is a power of testimony in the Church such that the gates of hell cannot hold that light and they break, so the light shines in hell. This is a different interpretation of the experience of the martyrs.

**Don’t you think that the narrative of defending traditional values has some kind of internal anguish, some tension that leads defenders of these values to embrace extreme positions ...**

Yes, I also notice the striking similarity of the discourse on the protection of traditional values to conspiracy theories. Why not defend these moral positions normally? Why do you constantly need to involve some schemes about conspiracy? How does this fusion of discourses happen, why does one generate the other? I think it’s an old-fashioned problem of modernity. My teacher was Zygmunt Bauman, who shocked Europe with the statement that the Holocaust was an outgrowth of modernity.<sup>6</sup> That the Holocaust is only possible in a modern society. It seems to me that the defenders of traditional values are also an outgrowth of modernity. These are people who defend an ideal and at the same time know that this ideal is not represented by anybody. Either you say that you adhere to values that no one holds, including yourself, which is certainly

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6 See Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).

a humorous position, or you have to offer some kind of conspiracy model that explains where these values reside beyond our everyday perception. They say that there are communities that keep these values, but as lay-people we do not see them, we do not know them, and cannot. There is a strange fusion of a radical modernist position, a vulgar dichotomy of is and ought with conspiratorial language. We cannot point to a real Christian experience in which these traditional values exist. We're protecting something that's not there. And we can't admit it openly. We can only say that traditional values are like the city of Kitezh,<sup>7</sup> which still exists somewhere, and we just need to understand where it exists – on Mount Athos, maybe beyond the Urals, maybe with a single monk who hasn't left his cell for fifty-three years. We see a conspiricization of holiness. It is a deeply paradoxical situation: the Russian Orthodox Church has canonized over a thousand new saints and has invited us to know them by name, to learn about them as people who make up the face of the church in difficult times. And what is happening instead? Today, the figure of the holy is covered in conspiracy theories. Who are the saints for the advocates of traditional values? What does humanity mean for those who represent the anti-humanist milieu of the Church? What is humanity for those who say they are not interested in humanism or human rights? Who do they follow within the Orthodox Church, not as an ideological leader, but as an example of humaneness?

### Does today's Russia have any specifics in terms of traditionalism?

There is a wonderful book by Mark Sedgwick, prophetically translated into Russian.<sup>8</sup> It is constructed as an intellectual biography of René Guénon and his followers. This book is remarkable for the fact that it was written more than ten years ago and its last chapter is on the fate of traditionalism in Russia. And it already shows to what extent the situation of tradi-

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7 In Russian mythology a city that mysteriously disappeared in the 13<sup>th</sup> century under the waters of the lake Svetloyar when the Mongols wanted to conquer it.

8 Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

tionalism in Russia is strange. It is the only country in the world where traditionalism has managed to break out of the marginal field. To come together with the authorities. This simply has never happened anywhere. All of traditionalism's attempts to flirt with power in other contexts have not led to anything. This only happened in Russia.

**How do you see a way out of this situation? Is there any reason to hope for an alternative to “protecting traditional values”?**

I would like to stress once again that the way out is to raise the topic of holiness and the subject of the testimony of faith in the public space. A sign, a sociological symptom for me was the TV series *The Young Pope*. It's a really curious phenomenon: many people said, “What an abomination!,” “It's a parody of the Church!” But when we look at the part of society that was delighted with this series, we see that it resonated with people who are not represented in the Church. These people said, “We expect you, dear Christians, to do just that.” This was the first time the unrepresented spoke. The great hope is that they see hope in the Church and that hope is in the experience of holiness. Not in the Church as a new power, finance, network, control, but in the Church as a witness to the truth. For me, hope is in this position of a witness. In philosophy and social theory, it seems to me, there is still no developed toolkit to talk about testimony. This is what Paul Ricoeur tried to do in his old age when he said that after 300 years of a philosophy of suspicion, we must create an equally powerful philosophy of witness and recognition. But it was never created. This work hasn't been done yet.

*Interviewed by Olena Kostenko on 31 January 2017*