

For the first time I heard about AIDS in 1984. It's remarkable that a person who told me about new illness was an orthodox priest. In general he told me the following: "Now a new illness appeared in the world. It affects immunity of person and after it he can die from the very trifling illness. This illness is transmitted such a way, that mainly drug addicts, homosexuals, prostitutes and their clients fall ill. God sent into the world such illness to slow down the dynamics of sin spread among people. Some of them abstain of these sins because of the fear to be infected, whereas the spreaders of spiritual pest are punished by death selectively. It serves as a symbol that grace leaves sinners, a grace that spiritually protects people, - just as immunity protects them physically, - and after grace leaves person perishes. This is a very well-timed and very significant illness."

I suggest that majority of the members of the Orthodox Church think about HIV the same way till now. But to speak aloud, openly – isn't accepted because some can accuse person who expressed this point of view about illness in hard-heartedness and calumny on God. But there is truth in this opinion, though we can't not to accept that some simplification and one-sidedness accompany it. It becomes necessary to tell several words in defense of the people who think this way.

About "hard-heartedness". If fatal ill person is operated and his organ affected by cancer is cut off and after it he, becoming an invalid, gets several years of life more and we are happy. But we are happy not because one of his organs was shortened but because he won't die soon and that he'll stay with us some time more. The same about AIDS: we are glad not because some people died even if they were the transmitters of sinful illness, but because as a result of their removal from the body of humankind this humankind became more healthy. And we can only cry about the death of these sinners.

About their calumny on God. Does God "authorize" the destruction of sinners, is it allowable to think so, to tell so? Yes, it's allowable. If it wouldn't be allowable, how could we understand the words of Old Testament about the Flood, about destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, how could we understand an order to Israel to exterminate impious peoples? These are the corresponding

citations from Scriptus: "And, behold, I, even I, do bring a flood of waters upon the earth, to destroy all flesh, wherein is the breath of life, from under heaven; and every thing that is in the earth shall die." Genesis 6:17. "Then the LORD rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the LORD out of heaven;" Genesis 19:24. "So Joshua smote all the country of the hills, and of the south, and of the vale, and of the springs, and all their kings: he left none remaining, but utterly destroyed all that breathed, as the LORD God of Israel commanded." Joshua 10:40. Not only for Old Testament time but for ever the next statement of Scriptus is true:" For the eyes of the Lord are over the righteous, and his ears are open unto their prayers: but the face of the Lord is against them that do evil." 1 Peter 3:12.

But it's necessary to express the same opinion about AIDS more precisely. God allowed this new illness to appear to teach sinners and to stop the spread of several extremely destructive kinds of sin. But if God allowed AIDS to appear for our blessing, wouldn't it be right to retire from struggle with this illness? No, we not only can but we must enter the struggle against it. These are the words of father Doropheus: "Everything that happens, happens with God's permission or approval, as it says in the Prophet, "I, the Lord, make the light and create darkness", and again, "There is no evil in the city which the Lord did not make". He speaks of evil here in the sense of the consequences of evil and the troubles that are brought upon us for our correction because of the evil we do, such evils as famine, earthquakes, droughts, diseases, and wars. All this happens to us, not according to God's pleasure, but by his permission, with his permission they come upon us for our profit. God does not, therefore, want us to desire them or to approve of them. For example: "It is God's will, in that he allows it, that the city be ruined". Since it is God's will that it be ruined, does he want us to set fire to it and burn it, or take a pickaxe and smash it down? Or it is God's will that someone be afflicted or sick; does he wish us then to afflict the person or to say that since it is God's will that he is sick we shall not take pity on him? No! God does not want this; He does not want us to serve him that way. He wants us to desire the good that He intends (as a result of this affliction), that which happens according to His good pleasure, as we said, all that is done in accord with the commandments: to love one another, to bear one another's burdens, to give alms and the like. That is the good that God wills."

I'd like to add in conclusion that not only desperate sinners catch HIV, but there are a lot of people among them who are innocent and didn't consume drugs and never led dissolute life. Even innocent babies are ill and die from this illness. And many sinners are not sinners forever but leave sin and cry over their lives. If they took this fatal illness during vicious period of their life, how cannot one struggle for prolongation of their life when they entered the way of repentance? And we have to grieve about the death of the repentant sinners but not be pleased with it.

So, orthodox people can enter sincerely the active struggle against this fatal disease and at the same time to thank God for it as for every mournful thing that God allowed on us (hunger,

death, earthquake, absence of rain, diseases, wars) which are given for our blessing. Let's remember the consolation of apostle: "My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him: 6 For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. 7 If you endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons." Hebrews 12: 5-7.

What anti-AIDS programs orthodox people can take part? After taking part in several seminars on drug addiction problems I realized that the most disputable is possibility for orthodox people to participate in programs of syringe exchange and condoms distribution to drug addicts (I emphasize: syringe exchange but not its distribution, always only exchange). Usually priests, who hear for the first time appeal to bless such participation, refuse to do it categorically. But later part of the Orthodox priesthood agree that it's possible to give blessing for participation in exchange program whereas the other part stays at the previous position of categorical aversion of this program. I am from the number of people who changed his previous opinion. Though I couldn't find at once logical substantiation for intuitively changed opinion but finally the reasons for apologizing of such opinion change were found. These reasons I'd like to suggest to your attention and at the same time to your judgment.

The first opinion against this exchange program consists of consideration that if this program gives the lowering of number of HIV-infected people, at the same time it would directly promote the drug addiction of population. In such situation when plus and minus from the introduction of the program equalize each other it's unclear what to prefer. But actually there is no problem of choice here. We already know about the consequences of introduction of this program, because it started successfully in several countries. As I know where this program works the number of HIV-infected people became noticeably lower and at the same time wasn't seen increase number of drug addicts, taking into account an error of supervision.

The second objection is absolutely different. Though the program is effective but would a person become an accomplice of sin, with which he planned to struggle against, if he would take part in this program? Let's remember what is written in the psalm 49 (if to change a word "thief" by "drug addict" it will seem that this text is written about our case): "But unto the wicked God saith, What hast thou to do to declare my statutes, or that thou shouldest take my covenant in thy mouth? 17 Seeing thou hatest instruction, and castest my words behind thee. 18 When thou sawest a thief, then thou consentedst with him, and hast been partaker with adulterers", - further more there is a list of several more sins and finally God says his verdict, - "These things hast thou done, and I kept silence; thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself: but I will reprove thee, and set them in order before thine eyes". So does person committee a sin or not changing syringes to drug addicts and giving them condoms? This is not an idle question for a Christian.

As condoms can serve more evident symbol of sin than syringes that become a means of sin only in the hands of drug addict, so let's speak about condoms to answer our question. First of all I apologize to God and to all who are listening to me, for these images which must reveal the required answer. Let's imagine for the first, a condom against a background or in the space of a church, secondly, against a background of matrimonial bedroom or in the space of matrimonial bedroom, for the third, against a background of the brothel or in the space of the brothel. In the church a condom is impossible, it's not only a symbol of a sin in the church, but a real blasphemy. In the matrimonial bedroom it's as symbol, as a means of a sin. And in the brothel? Against a background of the brothel which is by itself a citadel of a sin, a condom is not thought as a symbol of a sin and in the brothel it will be only a means of hygiene. From above-mentioned we see that symbolic and semantic matter of every thing depends on the background against which it's introduced. One more example. A Host in the church and in the brothel. It's a means of consecration in the church and in the brothel its presence becomes a blasphemy.

Now it won't be difficult for us to answer our question. God intended to make all the world the temple. We know that saints see world this way: as a God's temple. And pious priests and laity try to see world as a temple too. But a sin entered the world by the help of devil. The world lies in the evil. And world spoiled by sin in conscience of many people becomes more a brothel than a temple. More and more people see the world as a huge brothel. The world is divided spiritually. Some aspire to purity and sanctity and according to their consecration the world becomes a temple for them, others chose a way of sin and dirtiness and according to their defilement they start to orient in the world as in the well-groom brothel. And as for some the world is a threshold of a paradise then for some it's a limbo.

Priests with their parishioners and drug addicts – are inhabitants of these two diametrically opposite spiritual spaces. Touching to the world of drug addicts and prostitutes a person touches the hell. And against a background of the hell pure syringes for heroin injections and condoms are not more the appeal to sin (because people, who are inhabiting it, are for a long time active servants of the sin), these things only constrain the dynamics of self destroy of its poor inhabitants there, they are only the means of hygiene there. Its distribution isn't a sin. Only goal and intention of a person who gives it can be sinful. For example, drug dealers are interested for consumers of their product live longer, that will be profitable for them. But intention and goal of distribution can be at the same time charitable. If distribution has its aim not only save the health of the stray people, but also through meetings with drug addicts during the process of distribution of syringes to help them to leave a sin, God will bless such intention.

It isn't difficult to notice that a few simplifications are permitted in this reasoning and that it's

made in very contrast oppositions: light and darkness. Will the conclusion change a lot if we make the consideration more complicated including in it all variety of life situations, if we imagine alive people instead of servants of light and darkness? It seems to me that not.

Now let's move to the general view on drug addiction problem. The society of drug addicts is under the special protection of drug dealers and their father devil, it carries them tremendous profit. That's why attempts to save drug addicts inevitably lead people, who decided to struggle against it, to the first line of the struggle with evil. And they have to clarify for themselves the following. Varied struggle with drug addiction and phenomena that accompany it (the syringe exchange program is only one of the many cases of this struggle) really can and will put its participants in the situations when active counteraction to the evil will make person to do sinful actions. Literally sinful actions, and not only covered by sin that accompany all our activity. As, for example, when we sit at the diner table we often overeat, when we teach others piety – we become vain, when we correct guilty people – we become angry, when we communicate with opposite sex we can't not to commit sin against chastity, as we need to take care of place of habitation and food - we fall into love of the money, in cases of unfortunes we excessively despond and etc. When we're touching with the world of drug addicts, whose life is overwhelmed by sin we especially can't not to harm to our moral purity having loyalty of our initial intentions. We speak not about it. In this life in our reality, opposition to the evil compels the opponents of the evil to resort to sinful actions. In the beginning of the 20th century there was a great argument in Russian community on this question, which was formulated as a question of "resistance to evil by violence". Not trying to express all the depth of above-mentioned argument, I'll express here one of the main conclusions that was accepted by church. "In our Christian duty to protect our neighbors and all the world from the evil ... Christian duty compel us more likely to commit a sin, than saving our personal chastity and sanctity because of our inactivity be innocent in triumph of evil in the world, against which we didn't started to struggle. A Christian must commit a sin in his outside struggle with evil, i.e. in protection a world from evil in a case when before voice of conscience a sin of inactivity will be bigger than a sin connected with active counteraction to evil". (Here is citation from "A light in the darkness" of philosopher S. Frank).

Let's discuss an evident example from church history. I'd like to remind a life of Saint Vitaly. Saint Vitaly, a monk of the monastery of Saint Serid, went to Alexandria when there was patriarch John the Gracious (609-620).

A saint, when he became old (he was 60), dared to take an unusual feat on himself: he wrote the names of all fornicatrices of Alexandria and started to pray for them assiduously. A saint worked from the very morning till evening and he got every day 12 copper coins. In the evening he bought one bean for himself which he ate not earlier than in the sunset. The rest of money he gave to one of the fornicatrices to whom he came for a night and said: "I pray you to be in

chastity this night for this money, don't commit a sin with anybody." Then a saint locked up with her in her room and when a fornicatress slept he was praying all the night reading psalms and in the morning he went away quietly from her. And he did it every day, visiting all the fornicatresses by turns, and he made them swear that they will keep secret a goal of his visits. Inhabitants of Alexandria, who didn't know the truth, were indignant with his behavior, offended him different ways and he bore all sneers obediently and only asked not to judge others.

Saint prays of Saint Vitaly saved many fallen women.

All the truth about the Saint was known only after his death. When women saved by him knew about saint Vitaly death, they gathered and only then told about virtue and mercy of the saint.

Let's ask a question: why did a saint make fornicatresses not to tell the truth about him? One reason is evident: sneers and humiliation from the people help an ascetic in his spiritual life, at the time when glory and honors impede him. But this reason wasn't the only one and I think not main one. Let's imagine what would happen if saint Vitaly allowed to tell open witnesses about his activity? The heads of brothels will stop to allow him even enter to their brothels, as a person who ruins their business. The fornicatresses will avoid his visits because they would become an object of venomous sneers from other fornicates and other sinful people. And also it will be very awkwardly for them to take money from him. So the activity of saint of loose women saving would stop in its very beginning.

But concealing a truth about himself a saint committed a very big sin: he tempted all Alexandria. New Testament says: "Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!" Matt. 18:7. The truth is that when he died this temptation ended but not all the people who were witnesses of the temptation became at the same time witnesses of glorification of the saint. The sin wasn't imaginary.

People who are reading the life of Saint Vitaly are not confused by the circumstance that this ascetic is included by church in the number of saints though his main feat was connected with sin. Majority doesn't notice it at all. And can we doubt if God glorified him before people? No, of course. But we must reflect about this fact. Otherwise we can fall in the situation in our life when we'll refuse in church blessing to the people who are moved to the activity by God's grace. And we'll be sure in our correctness unshakably because this activity doesn't look faultless from moral point of view.

Let's now return from general question to concrete: to the question about possibility for orthodox people to take part in syringe exchange program. If the first proof (that participation in it accompanying by good intention of a person who makes it isn't sinful), - isn't enough convincing for somebody, may be this person will be a bit calmed by above-mentioned philosophic-historical witness?

About the program we can add the following. The main goal of the program for its orthodox participants consists of try to help drug addict to stop his addiction. The exchange itself, quite comprehensible, allows us to contact with drug addict. Then a lot depends on the skill of executors to direct good action in the right way. I wouldn't like to give advices but I can't keep myself from one. From the very beginning you must know from drug addict who comes to you his saint name, know whether he was baptized or not. Then you have to tell him that church community, whose member he is, will pray for the saving of this lost God's son. And as for the rest will prays of saint Vitaly help people who take part in this activity and will God bless them.

When a person hears about AIDS for the first time, when then he thinks about this strange illness, he has then a mystic feeling. To tell that AIDS was allowed by God because of our sins is not enough. For such an illness this is too trivial. We have not false feeling that God warn us by occurrence of this illness from something very important. From what? Visible world reflects symbolically the world spiritual. Saint Maxim the Confessor says about it: "The whole spiritual world mystically is introduced by symbolic pictures in the sensible world for them who have eyes to see. The whole sensible world is included in spiritual world." I won't dare to say about myself that I am a person who has clear spiritual sight. But hoping on indulgence of people who gathered here I'd like to share my thoughts from this point of view on this illness.

According to the witness of Fathers of the Church body illness symbolizes spiritual illness. Some illnesses carry bigger symbolic and sense loading, for example, cancer or leprosy (let's remember how many pages of the Bible are dedicated the last one). AIDS without doubt has to be considered in their number. This illness destroys immunity of a person. Immunity protects person from perish when he is infected by something. In spiritual world person is protected by God's grace that protects him from spiritual death when he's tempted by sin. Affection of immunity must symbolize removal of grace protection.

Now let's remember what does Bible says about Coming of our Lord. "Now we beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto him, 2:2 That ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter

as from us, as that the day of Christ is at hand. 2:3 Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; 2:4 Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God. 2:6 And now ye know what withholdeth that he might be revealed in his time. 2:7 For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way.” 2 Thes. 2:1-4, 6-7. According to the opinion of majority of the Fathers of Church by “he who letteth will let” must be meant the action of Holy Spirit in the world, His protection and defense. What must signify the origin of the illness in recent time that symbolizes removal of grace protection from people? Probably that “he who letteth will let” is taken out of the way. I.e. the world enters if not at the homestretch of its history, but at its last circle – for sure. And not occasionally this illness caused such an alarm, let out into the world such number of ridiculous fears, caused general concern, in particular gathered all of us here today.