

Fr. Perozich comments –

Why do people like James Martin SJ and other Catholics put a personal interpretation on the gospels which often is in such variance with the Holy Bible?

The Orthodox researcher Metropolitan Hilarion, opened the academic theological conference with a programme paper on Jesus Christ and His Parables.

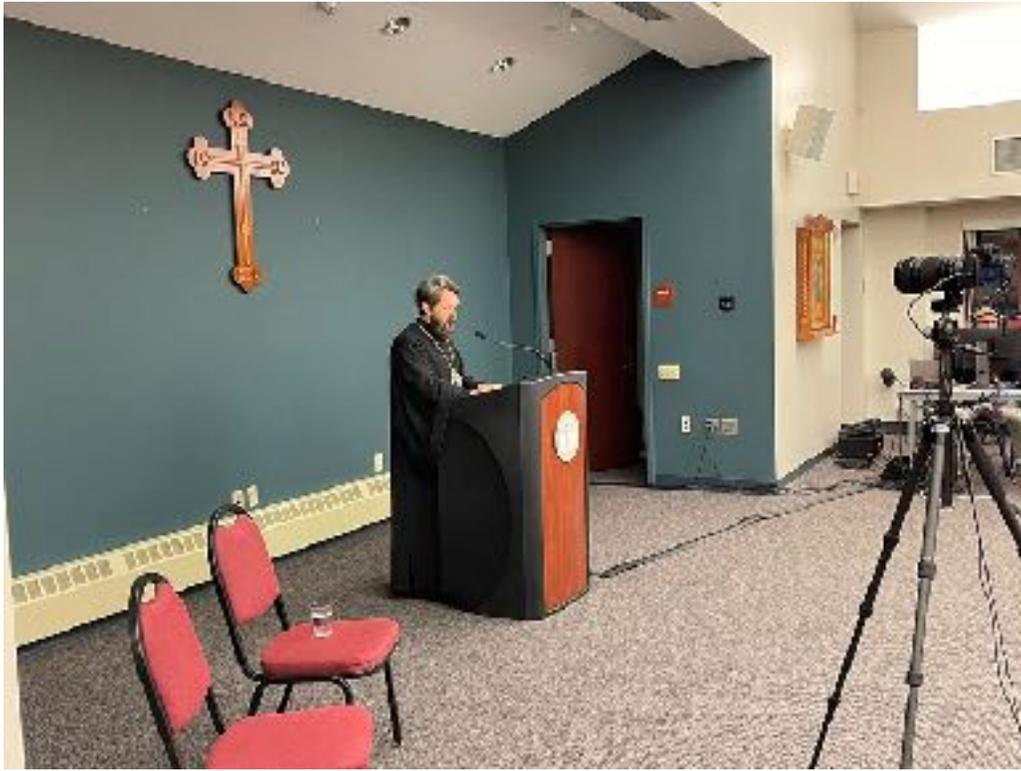
The italics in this article are preamble to part of the talk by Metropolitan Hilarion. The bolding and color are my additions to highlight some points of the article.

- **basic problems of western New Testament scholarship**, which an Orthodox researcher happens to encounter. **“For more than two hundred years, New Testament scholarship has developed under the influence of myths created by scholars. A particular myth would appear in the mind of a researcher or group of researchers, and then other scholars would take it up and begin to analyze, add to, develop, and dispute it. As a result, the myth became the subject of scientific inquiry, and not the Gospel text, which was used merely as an aid to prove that the inventors of the myth were correct”**.

*The Russian Orthodox Church:
Department of External Church Relations*

**DECR Chairman speaks at the
opening of a theological conference
at St. Vladimir’s Seminary of the
Orthodox Church in America**





On November 11, 2021, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, who is in St. Vladimir's Seminary in New York with a blessing of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia and at an invitation of His Beatitude Tikhon, Metropolitan of All America and Canada, spoke at the opening of an academic theological conference on Searching the Scriptures, devoted to the English translations of His Eminence's six-volumes study under the general title "Jesus Christ. His Life and Teaching".

Before the opening of the conference, the rector of St. Vladimir's Seminary gave a grand dinner in honour of the DECR chairman. Present were His Beatitude Metropolitan Tikhon of All America and Canada and hierarchs of the Orthodox Church in America - Archbishop Michael of New York and New Jersey, Archbishop Melchizedek of Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania; Bishop Nicholas of Manhattan, vicar of the ROCOR Eastern America Diocese; Metropolitan Mar Nikolovos of Northeast American Diocese of the Malankara Orthodox Church in the USA; Mar Dionisius John (Kawak), vicar of the Patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church in the USA; Bishop James Massa, rector of the Roman Catholic Seminary and St. Joseph College; Archimandrite Jeremiah (Davis), protosynkellos of the Antiochian Archdiocese of North America; Archpriest John Parker, dean of St. Tikhon's Seminary; Canon Christopher Kulpepper, representative of the head of the Anglican Church in North America; Prof Garwood Anderson, dean of the Nashotah-House Seminary; Mr. Ivan Schidlovsky, dean of the ROCOR Holy Trinity Seminary; representatives of the Grace and Mercy Foundation led by its founder Bill Hwang; as well as numerous

representatives of other Christian confessions working in the area of New Testament studies.

Opening the event, President of the seminary Archpriest Chad Hatfield spoke about the cooperation of his seminary and the SVS Press publishers with Metropolitan Hilarion, who in 2014 was conferred the degree of Doctor of Theology by St. Vladimir's Seminary. For the past decade, eighteen Metropolitan Hilarion's books were translated into English and published, including four of the six volumes of the monograph "Jesus Christ. His Life and Teaching". The latest of the translated and published volumes is devoted to parables of Jesus Christ.

After that, the president of the seminary gave the floor to Metropolitan Hilarion, who opened the academic theological conference with a programme paper on Jesus Christ and His Parables.

In the first part of his keynote statement, Metropolitan Hilarion spoke about how the six-volume monograph about Jesus Christ was created and about **basic problems of western New Testament scholarship**, which an Orthodox researcher happens to encounter. **"For more than two hundred years, New Testament scholarship has developed under the influence of myths created by scholars. A particular myth would appear in the mind of a researcher or group of researchers, and then other scholars would take it up and begin to analyze, add to, develop, and dispute it. As a result, the myth became the subject of scientific inquiry, and not the Gospel text, which was used merely as an aid to prove that the inventors of the myth were correct"**.

Among such myths is, for example, a notion that the Gospels were created for a specific audience, namely, the church

communities to which evangelists belonged. The essence of this theory is that at the end of the first century there were isolated Judeo-Christian communities, which were persecuted by the Gentiles and which experienced various inner crises linked to the conflicts between those newly converted from paganism and Judaism. Within these communities Gospels supposedly appeared that had the aim of strengthening the faith of the members of these communities, consoling them in times of persecution from “external enemies” and lowering the internal potential for conflict. Each community, according to this point of view, “projected its own problems and answers back into the reports of the life of Jesus”: it is in the light of these problems and issues that we ought to understand the Gospel text. How is this concept applied in practice? **At first, on the basis of the text of a particular Gospel, conclusions are drawn regarding the fundamental characteristics of the hypothetical communities in which they were created, and then the same text is examined in the light of the conclusions made.**

The speaker called this approach erroneous and unsound for a whole range of reasons. Firstly, it undermines trust in the Gospels as historical sources containing reliable information on what Jesus did and taught, as it turns Jesus into a literary character created by a particular author for concrete pastoral needs. **Secondly,** it underestimates the role of inter-church communication as it was in the first century, when there was a broad communication network, which allowed for all sorts of information to be exchanged quickly and regularly. In this situation, it is difficult to imagine an author who would write a text of such calibre as any one of the four Gospels proceeding from the narrow needs of his community and not bearing in mind the potential reader from other communities (not to mention future generations of readers). **Thirdly,** this approach is based on

the paradigm of “literary thinking,” according to which the whole process of creating the Gospels took place during the process of study and was reduced to the writing of texts and their redaction. This paradigm does not take into account the peculiarities of the oral tradition within which the Gospels or their prototypes—separate topics from the life of Jesus and His separate sayings—existed for what would appear to have been quite a long time.

Metropolitan Hilarion called upon the scholars who assembled in the hall to joint work for ‘demytholizing; the New Testament scholarship, that is, to liberate it from the myths created by scholars in the 19th-20th centuries as lacking a basis in the text of the New Testament. The successful solution of the problem will largely determine the future direction of the New Testament studies, he stressed.

In the second part of his address, Metropolitan Hilarion spoke about the parables of Jesus Christ. According to him, **“Among all of Jesus’ teachings in His direct speech, the parables of Jesus are the most difficult to interpret. Even for his own contemporaries, they were mostly incomprehensible, a fact underlined by his disciples’ repeated requests for clarification of individual parables. One of the explanations of the reasons why Jesus spoke in parables “is based on the fact that the very image of Jesus, His miracles and His preaching made a twofold influence on people: ones were strengthened in their faith, while others, on the contrary, felt alienation and hate”.**

A simple but convincing answer to the question of why Jesus spoke in parables is given by John Chrysostom. In his opinion, Jesus spoke in parables to

make the discourse “more emphatic”, and he used metaphorical imagery because he was speaking of exalted realities. “Therefore neither at the beginning did He so discourse to them, but with much plainness; but **because they perverted themselves, thenceforth he speaks in parables**”. As a rule, the telling is in prose, but the figurative structure, language, laconic form of presentation, and axioms and sayings used repeatedly (whoever has ears to hear, let him hear, etc.)—these are elements common to verse, giving each parable a poetic hue. The parable genre shares elements of both prose and poetry. Consequently, the way people listen to parables is similar to how they read poetry. As a rule, readers do not search for moral lessons in poems. Much more important are the images, the sounds, the rhythm, the play of words, or other techniques of poetic mastery.

The **parable** has a certain similarity to a fable or fairy tale. Like the fable, **it is built on metaphor, and in some cases ends with a direct indication of how the metaphor relates to reality**. Like a fairy tale, the parable does not pretend to be realistic and can contain various fantastical details or even end earlier than the listener might like. Having listened to a fable or a fairy tale, children will sometimes ask, “What happens next?” Adults might think this an inappropriate question, even a comical one, but this is only because they understand the rules of the genre. One of these is that not all the details of the telling have equal significance and not every detail requires interpretation. **John Chrysostom wrote that one should not pay attention to everything in a given parable.**

In conclusion of his keynote address, Metropolitan Hilarion noted, **“The Church preserves the teachings of Jesus, and she is their most authoritative interpreter. Over many centuries, the Church developed an exegetical tradition**

that allowed many generations of Christians to understand the meaning of parables, to apply them to their own life's circumstances, to distil from them various moral lessons and spiritual instructions. Without jumping to excessive allegorizing or extreme literalism, such interpreters as John Chrysostom applied Jesus' parables to situations relevant for their own contemporaries, helping them read the parables not as theoretical presentations (which they never were), but as calls to action”.

At the same time, he said, “No single ecclesiastical community can ‘privatize’ Jesus and his teaching, declaring themselves to be the exclusive owners of the rights to His inheritance and to claim to be the exclusive owner of the rights to His heritage. Jesus is greater than the Church, because he is God himself, who came to earth in human flesh. The meaning of his person and teaching are so universal and all-encompassing that they go beyond the confines of the Church. Jesus belongs to the entire world and to every person. He has something to say to every human being, both to those who are already in the Church and those who are on the path to it and those who are far from it and from any religious affiliation at all”. And the parables of Jesus “belong not only to the Church and not only to believers. They belong to all mankind. They are capable of saying something new to each person”.

Metropolitan Hilarion's presentation was attended by His Beatitude Tikhon, Metropolitan of All America and Canada, and other participants in the dinner given in his honour by president of the seminary Archpriest Chad Hatfield. About a thousand more people listened to the keynote address online.

The conference will continue on November 12 with papers to be read by leading American specialists in the New Testament, among them Professor Emeritus Carl Holladay, the Emory University; Professor of Biblical Studies Craig Keenner, Asbury Theological Seminary; Professor of New Testament Studies Gregory Sterling, Yale Divinity School; Professor Emeritus Edit Humphrey, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary; Prof Garwood Anderson, head of the Nashotah-House Theological Seminary; Mr John Barnet, Associate Professor at the Chair of the New Testament, St. Vladimir's Seminary; Associate Professor Bruce Beck, the Holy Cross Seminary in Brooklyn, MA; Prof of Religion and Philosophy James Walles, Christian Brothers University in Memphis, Ten.

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