On the role of religious organizations in post-war restoration of Syria

Report of Archbishop Leonid of Vladikavkaz and Alania, deputy head of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relation (DECR), to the international conference on Syrian refugees' and internally displaced people's return to their homes, November 10-12, 2020, Damascus.

Esteemed representatives of state leadership, ministries and departments in Russia and Syria,

Distinguished assembly:

I greet you on behalf of the Russian Orthodox Church and personally His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia.

As you know, from the very beginning of the present crisis the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian State have been with our Syrian brothers.

His Holiness Patriarch Kirill visited Damascus in 2011 and saw with his own eyes the tragedy, which had already begun, and raised his voice in defense of this much-suffering country. We were concerned for the future of Christianity in this biblical region in which it existed from the earliest days. We have empathized with all the Syrians regardless of their religious or confessional affiliation - both Christians and Muslims, seeing in each of them the neighbor to whom the Lord has commanded us to help. These feelings have been strengthened by the bonds of our centuries-old friendship.

Our priority task was to break the information blockade and to bring the truth about the suffering of the Syrian people to the world public. We invariably promoted this topic in our contacts with world state leaders and religious leaders, as well as at major international platforms.

His Holiness Patriarch Kirill's deep concern for the destiny of the Syrian people and for dangerous developments in the Middle East as a whole became the principal reason for organizing his meeting with Pope Francis of Rome in February 2016 in Havana. After a common statement of the two leaders of the largest Christian communities in the world it became no longer possible to hush up the truth about the Syrian tragedy. Immediately after the Havana Meeting, the first joint humanitarian projects were launched in Syria.

Earlier the Russian Orthodox Church had already given aid to Syrians by raising funds for it in her

dioceses, parishes and monasteries and asking public organizations and benefactors for help.

For the Russian Orthodox Church the priority partners in realizing humanitarian projects are traditional religious confessions in Syria, above all the ancient Orthodox Church of Antioch, with which we are tied by ages-old fraternal bonds. The role of religious organizations in the post-war restoration of Syrian is very significant. The indisputable authority they enjoy among the local population, their concern for the prevention of their exodus from their native land, closeness to people, and profound awareness of their urgent needs - all this enhances the effectiveness of the humanitarian work and makes it possible for us to give it a specific and targeted nature. It is important to note that religious organizations seek not to restrict the aid only to people of their own faith but also to help all those who have been affected by the war, regardless of their confessional affiliation, which has been repeatedly emphasized by His Beatitude Patriarch John X of Antioch in his statements. With the support of our Church, the Patriarchate of Antioch has carried out quite a number of socio-charitable projects: distributing food packages to families in the Damascus regions affected by the war, as well as in Homs, the Valley of Christians, Latakia, Tartus; paying for surgical operations are paid for; re-equipping medical establishments; restoring the church education compound in Arbin, which is close to completion.

In 2017, with a blessing of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill, the Presidential Council for Cooperation with Religious Associations set up an Interreligious Working Group for aid to the Syrian population. It included representatives of Christian and Muslim communities in Russia and a number of public organizations. For this occasion an Interreligious Foundation for Assistance in Implementing Joint Humanitarian Projects was established.

In churches and mosques in Russia, ordinary believers began raising funds for purchasing humanitarian aid for Syria. In 2017, two aircrafts with humanitarian cargo were sent to the country. With the assistance of the Russian army group in Syria and the Center for Reconciliation of the Opposing Sides, the aid was distributed to the neediest people in Latakia, Homs and recently liberated Aleppo. On behalf of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Interreligious Working Group, I would like to thank the Russian Federation Ministry of Defence and personally the head of the General Staff of the Russian Federation Armed Forces, Valery Gerasimov, for the support of our projects in Syria.

In February 2018, 77 tons of high quality foodstuffs were delivered to Damascus and the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon, where there are many Syrian refugees. The food was distributed to families in need. The distribution was made in Syrian churches and mosques together by Syrian and Russian Christians and Muslims. It also became a visible symbol of our solidarity.

In November 2018, an aid supply was conveyed to the Damascus boarding school for children of the fallen Syrian military, and by the New Year the classes of this school and dormitories had been fully

equipped with warm floors.

In March 2019, the Interreligious Group delivered to Damascus and distributed 15 tons of foodstuffs for Syrian families in need.

All these humanitarian actions of the Interreligious Working Group were carried out together with religious leaders in Syria. To coordinate the efforts of the Working Group and Christian and Muslim communities in Syria, joint meetings and roundtable conferences were held in Damascus.

As a vice-chairman of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, I would like to say that our department, on the instruction of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill, has supervised all this work. The problem of Syria was and is one of the principal items on our agenda.

In September 2018, a high-level interreligious conference took place at the Patriarchate of Antioch in Damascus. It was attended by heads and representatives of all the religious communities in Syria. The interreligious delegation from Russia was led at that time by Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, head of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate. The conference was chaired by His Beatitude Patriarch John X of Great Antioch and All the East and His Excellency Shaikh Mohammad Abdul-Sattar al-Sayyed, Minister of Awqaf. At that time, the Syrian brothers spoke of the need to restore the social structure in Syria and asked the Interreligious Working Group to take upon iself one of the socially important facilities.

After consultations with religious leaders in Syria and representatives of the state authority, we chose the ruined general education school in the Barza district in Damascus. The eastern part of this district had been in the hands of terrorists for a long time, and the children there were subjected to ideological indoctrination in the militants' special centers. Children in the western part Barza, who saw all the terrors of war and violence, were deeply traumatized psychologically. Thanks to the restoration of the school, these and other children now can receive valid education. The work was carried out on a high quality level and within a short period of time, and already in September 2019 the children came to the restored school.

I would like to emphasize that the funds for a good cause were collected in churches and mosques in Russia by ordinary believers. A weighty personal contribution was made by His Holiness Patriarch Kirill.

A great help in implementing this project was given by the Russian Federation Ministry for Foreign Affairs, personally by Mikhail L. Bogdanov and Sergey V. Vershinin.

Separately I would like to thank the Russian Embassy in Syria, the present ambassador Alexander

Yefimov and his predecessor Alexander Kinshchak with all the staff members of the embassy, who are performing a heroic service in Syria. They are well aware of the projects of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Interreligious Working Group and give continued assistance in their implementation.

This conference and activities on its side-lines show the great attention that the Russian state and our president have given to the problem of post-war restoration of Syria and to providing it with humanitarian aid. The Russian Orthodox Church is ready to share her experience of this work.

We believe that in discussing this matter it is necessary to take into account the opinion of the religious communities in Syria. Among the priority items in the program for the rebirth of the country should be the restoration of destroyed holy places - churches, mosques, monasteries. Precisely these shrines represent the focal point of the normal life of Syrian cities and villages.

Much has already been done. With the help of Russian benefactors, the Patriarchate of Antioch has carried out restoration work in the Convent of St. Thecla Equal-to-the-Apostles in Maaloula, which had been in the hands of terrorists for a whole year, as well as in the Monasteries of St. George the Victor in Al-Humeira and Seyednaya, the Convents of the Most Holy Mother of God in Seyednaya and Blemman, and the church of Mar-Ilyas in the Louvaylia suburb of Damascus. In the final stage of restoration at present are the church of St. George the Victor in Arbin and the church of the Dormition of the Most Holy Mother of God in Az-Zabadani.

We plan to intensify our cooperation with the Patriarchate of Antioch in this sphere. We have already received from His Beatitude Patriarch John X of Antioch a list of religious places in need of restoration. Restoration documents have already been prepared for some of them, for instance, for the Orthodox church in Daraya.

We would like to see Syrian authoritative religious leaders continuing to be among the principal coordinators of our joint projects from the Syrian side.

It is necessary to continue restoring schools and other educational establishments and to help with educational and methodological aids. Many young Syrians have shown the wish to learn the Russian language. The school in Barza restored with the help of Russia can become one of the centers for teaching Russian.

There is still an acute need for restoring houses of Syrians who were affected by hostilities, as well as hospitals and clinics. In this connection, it is necessary to complete the projects for restoration of the Patriarchate of Antioch’s hospital in Al-Hosn, in which the catheterization and cardio-surgery wards have been opened recently. The purchase of equipment and control of the quality of the equipment

purchased in Russia for these wards has already started.

Throughout the year 2019, a program, negotiated with the Orthodox Church of Antioch, for prosthesis and rehabilitation of Syrian children, who have lost their limbs in bomb and mine explosions, was carried out.

Already 11 children undertook treatment, prosthesis and rehabilitation in Moscow. The coronavirus pandemic has prevented us from active continuation of children's treatment in Moscow in 2020. We plan to open together a children's center of prosthesis and rehabilitation in the nearest future to function at the representation of the Russian Orthodox Church to the Patriarchate of Great Antioch and All the East. Since early 2021, we will be able to help children locally, taking care of both new children and those who have already completed rehabilitation and now need to renew the prosthetic device, to undergo an additional treatment and to be given psychological help. It concerns both children and their parents.

It is important to take into account the fact that in the situation of the post-war devaluation of the Syrian currency, the unemployment is growing rapidly. We should think about developing complex measures for supporting the population and helping with the development of small-to-medium businesses.

As our friends in the Patriarchate of Antioch and other religious communities in Syria inform us, there is still a need for the following:

- Humanitarian food packages for affected families;
- Help with the payments for medicines and medical services (for instance, operations) for low-income sections of the population;
- Targeted aid to widows and orphans in Aleppo and other cities, who still cannot return to their homes and still have the status of internally displaced;
- And many other things.

We believe it important that at this conference we should develop a clear plan of concrete actions for short-term and longer-term outlook and begin implementing it together.

Thank you for your attention.

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