DECR secretary for inter-Christian relations on visit to India



Hieromonk Stephan (Igumnov), DECR secretary for inter-Christian relations, with the blessing of Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, head of the Moscow Patriarchate department for external church relations (DECR), was on a visit to India from December 16 to 20, 2018, to study the resumption of cooperation between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Malankara Church belonging to the old Saint Thomas Christian tradition. Earlier, a respective suggestion was made to Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia by Moran Mor Baselios Mar Thoma Paulose II, Catholicos of the East and Metropolitan of Malankara.

On December 18, Hieromonk Stephan was received in audience by the Primate of the Malankara Church in his residence in Kottayam, the state of Kerala. His Holiness Paulose II extended fraternal greetings to the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church noting that Christians in India did remember

the visit of Patriarch Kirill, then chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate department for external church relations, which took place in December 2006, as it became a major landmark in the new history of development of the bilateral relations. His Holiness also recalled his visit to Russia in 1988, when he was the youngest bishop of the Malankara Church, to take part as member of its delegation in the celebrations of the Millennium of the Baptism of Rus'. After that, His Holiness and Hieromonk Stephen discussed possible areas of cooperation between the Moscow Patriarchate and the Christians of St. Thomas tradition. Traditionally, among the major aspects of these relations was students' exchange. His Holiness stated with satisfaction that cooperation in this area was already resumed as the first student from the Malankara Church entered the Precentors School of Moscow Theological Academy. In the singing tradition of this Church, they still use the skills acquired by its students who had studied in Russia. The sides also considered prospects for developing cooperation in the areas of church life which are intensively developing today both in the Moscow Patriarchate and the Malankara Church.

On the same day, Hieromonk Stephen had a separate meeting with the chancellor of the Malankara Church Metropolitan Mar Dioscoros and visited the St. Thomas reliquary in the Malankara church administrative center and tombs of the late Catholicoses.

Father Stephan also held negotiations with the leaders of the international relations department of the Malankara Church to discuss in detail the proposals made during his meeting with the Malankara Catholicos. As promising areas for bilateral relations, they indicated possible development of cooperation in the academic sphere, church media, social service and youth work, and cooperation in the diaspora. The need for joint actions in defending Christians persecuted in some regions of the world and advocating traditional moral values was singled out as one of the most important aspects of cooperation.

Father Stephen also visited the St. Thomas Seminary, the largest educational institution of the Malankara Church. He had a talk with faculty and students and took part in the activities devoted to the forthcoming Christmas celebrations.

In the seminary, Father Stephan met with one of the oldest hierarchs of the Malankara Church, Metropolitan Mathews Mar Severios, a living witness of once close relationships between Christians in India and the Russian Orthodox Church. In the period from 1977 to 1979, His Eminence studied at St. Petersburg Theological Academy, of which then Archbishop Kirill of Vyborg, now Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, was the rector. Metropolitan Severios remembered his student's years in Russia with great warmth and asked to convey cordial greetings to the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church.

On December 20, a round-table conference on Russian-Indian inter-church relations took place at Sophia Academy. Along with Father Stephan, it was attended by prominent Indian theologians and priests. They recalled the zealous work carried out in India by Archimandrite Andronik (Yelpidinsky) and other Russian missionaries, the historic visits to Kerala by Patriarch Pimen, Metropolitan Alexy of Tallinn and Estonia (Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church in 1990-2008) and Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad (now Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia). The meeting discussed prospects for bilateral cooperation in the academic sphere.

To get acquainted with various aspects of the Malankara Church's life, Father Stephan visited a number of parishes in various cities in the state of Kerala, including the church of the Most Holy Mother of God in Arthat believed to be the place where St. Thomas began his preaching in India.

In the church of the Most Holy Mother of God in Akkikkavu, a warm reception was arranged along with a concert in the St. Thomas Christian tradition. Father Stephan addressed the numerous parishioners with words of greeting.

In the church of St. George the Conqueror in Cheriapalli, Father Stephan was introduced to one of the aspects of the Malankara Church's social service – the care of elderly parishioners, and had a warm talk with them.

A report about the results of the trip and meetings will be made to the Supreme Authorities of the Russian Orthodox Church, who will make a decision on further development of contacts with Indian Christians of the St. Thomas tradition.

DECR Communication Service

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