Greetings from Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk to the participants of the 15th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops of the Catholic Church

On 18 October 2018, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Department for external church relations arrived in Rome with the blessing of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia as an observer from the Russian Orthodox Church to attend the plenary session of the 15th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops of the Catholic Church being held in the Vatican on the theme "Young people, the faith and vocational discernment." Metropolitan Hilarion presented his greetings in Italian. The English version is given below.

Your Holiness,

Your Beatitudes, Your Eminences and Excellences:

On behalf of His Holiness Kirill, Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, allow me to convey brotherly greetings to you all on the occasion of the 15th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops of the Catholic Church on the theme "Young people, the faith and vocational discernment."

The participation of representatives of non-Catholic Churches in the work of the Synod has become a good tradition testifying to the growing level of inter-Christian co-operation on the most relevant issues of contemporary life which touch upon all Christians, irrespective of their confessional allegiance.

The theme of young people, their faith in Christ and the calling of the young to church ministry is one of the eternally relevant and vitally important issues, since we are dealing here with the future of Christianity and its mission in the modern world. When we speak of young people and their place in the Church, we at the same time are touching upon two very important topics closely interconnected with each other: the mission of the Church in relation to young people and youth ministry within the Church herself.

In the authoritative early Christian work called *The Shepherd of Hermas* the author speaks of the visions he experienced of God's Church: first she appears in the guise of an old woman, then in the form of a beautiful young girl. This is a remarkable and very profound image. Old and forever young, the Church is the repository of a thousand-year-old Christian Tradition and is at the same time the power

which transforms and renews the world around her.

Our times are made complex by the fact that there are various forces which compete for the younger generation by imposing upon them a huge wave of information which is at times very difficult to make sense of. Even the most idealistic strivings can be used by the powers of evil as the servants of Satan often “disguise themselves as ministers of righteousness” (2 Cor 11:15). In this situation the ability to be spiritually discerning becomes especially important. In his speech to young people His Holiness Patriarch Kirill indicated the need to discern the spirits: “On the topic of modern-day life, I would like in the first instance to appeal to our young people to be able to discern the spirits. This is far from easy, yet it would be wrong not to do so, for the devil mimics and imitates the striving for righteousness, for noble deeds and especially for freedom, for those ideas which are close to the human heart.” The contemporary mission of the Church is indeed to teach the younger generation to distinguish good from evil, truth from falsehood, the genuine and truly valuable from that which is instant, transient and superficial.

The Church’s social obligation is to enable the young to be guarded from destructive influences which have never been so widespread as today, especially in the developed countries. In the name of a misunderstood freedom, the notion of moral relativism is imposed upon young people, while religion is expelled to the margins of public life. The Churches must unite their efforts to withstand this current and vindicate the criteria of morality necessary for the spiritual well-being of future generations and society as a whole.

What we, the servants of the Church, can give the youth? A system of moral values? Yes, undoubtedly. An access to church sacraments? Again, yes. Theological education? This also. Yet our main treasure is not in these three. The most important and necessary that we can offer to all generations is Christ, crucified and risen. The Gospel image of the Lord Jesus Christ cannot but strikes a deep chord in the hearts of young people. However, it is important to bring this image to as many of them as possible through the available means of sermon and witness. Cultural, psychological and spiritual abyss separates the contemporary young people from Christ, from His spiritual and moral teaching. Our task is to help young people to overcome this abyss, to feel that they need Christ and that He can transform their life and fill it with content, meaning and inspiration.

In the age in which we live doubt is cast upon all truth. The Church, however, in spite of the spirit of the times, has always preached and continues to proclaim the absolute Truth, which is the Lord Jesus Christ, God who has come in the flesh. His moral teaching is inseparable from His God-man person. The Saviour states in the Gospel of John: “You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (Jn 8:32). Only genuine freedom from bondage to sin and evil can make human beings happy and help them realize their vocation in full measure. But this can happen only when we personally encounter

Christ, something which the Church helps us to do.

The Russian Church has experience in the mass conversion of people brought up in the environment of atheist ideology. After the fall of the communist regime a huge number of young people came to the Church where they could come into contact with the thousand-year-old Orthodox tradition and the fullness of life in Christ. It is undoubtedly true that the heroic endeavours of the martyrs and confessors for the faith during the time of persecution of the Church were the most convincing testimony to the crucified and risen Christ for all those who sincerely sought out the meaning of life. It was at that time that few religious schools were not able to accommodate all those who wanted to study theology in order to devote themselves to priestly ministry.

Now the situation has radically changed. Over a short period of time new seminaries opened in practically all of the dioceses of the Russian Orthodox Church. Against the background of the fall in priestly vocations in the West, the number of those entering theological institutes and seminaries in Russia was truly impressive. It is thanks to this that today a significant part of our clergy is young priests and deacons who are able to bear their witness of Christ to modern-day youth. His Holiness Patriarch Kirill regularly meets with thousands-strong youth audiences. The interest of the youth in the Church has not decreased; on the contrary, it is steadfastly growing.

The upbringing of youth in the Christian spirit is a project that we, the Orthodox, are willing to implement together with the Catholics. We have accumulated this kind of experience, and I am pleased to mention the contemporary project of summer institutes that have been organized since 2015 by the Russian Orthodox Church in co-operation with the Holy See. Each year a group of young priests and students from the Pontifical universities visits Russia in order to become better acquainted with the history, traditions and contemporary life of the Russian Orthodox Church. In turn, a group of young representatives of the Moscow Patriarchate is sent to Rome to visit the Vatican and the holy sites that are the heritage of all Christians, and to know better the Roman Catholic Church. This mutual acquaintance helps us to overcome misconceptions, enriches us spiritually and lays the foundation for co-operation between our Churches. The brotherly relationship between young pastors that has come into being as a result of these contacts allows us to hope that Catholics and Orthodox will “work together fraternally in proclaiming the Good News of salvation to testify together to the moral dignity and authentic freedom of the person.” This appeal was put out by His Holiness Pope Francis and His Holiness Patriarch Kirill in the Joint Declaration signed in Havana in 2016.

The student exchange programs and short-term Summer institutes are very popular with us, but we understand that only mutual acquaintance is not enough. This acquaintance should bring results for our society and our church communities. The essential content and a single agenda of cooperation of Christian youth should be determined by the one Gospel and one person of Jesus Christ that unite us.

The de-Christianization, secularism, transgression of Christian values and persecution of Christians are those negative factors of the worldwide objective reality which we confront even more frequently. These contemporary challenges are often discussed at official forums. Having united around Christ and the Gospel, our youth can become the creative and energetic force that will respond to these challenges. I am confident that eagerness and enthusiasm typical for the young age and inspiration by the power of the Gospel are capable not only to withstand the destructive factors, but also to reverse the situation.

It is my hope that one of the fruits of the work of the present Assembly of the Synod will be a further development of Orthodox-Catholic co-operation in this direction.

I wish you peace, God’s blessing and success in your work.

Source: https://mospat.ru/en/news/47044/