Address by Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk in Lisbon on the Russian Orthodox Church and Aid to Christians of the Middle East

On 19 September 2018, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations, delivered an address at the Catholic University Portugal in Lisbon on the Russian Orthodox Church and Aid to Christians of the Middle East.

Your Eminences and Excellencies, dear fathers, brothers and sisters,

May I thank you for the opportunity of speaking before you today. I would like to devote my presentation to one of the most important and tragic issues of contemporary life – the unprecedented persecution of Christians. I will also speak about the actions of the Russian Orthodox Church in helping our suffering brothers and sisters.

The beginning of the twenty-first century brought a vast wave of persecutions aimed at Christians in various countries around the world. Christians of the Middle East and north Africa find themselves in an especially calamitous situation. The region is rapidly becoming de-Christianized. I will give you some examples. Up until 2003 in Iraq there lived one and a half million Christians who made up five percent of the country's population. There were several hundred churches to be found in the country. But soon after the start of the so called 'Arab Spring', the majority of Christians there were forced to leave the country and their number at present, according to some calculations, hovers between 150 000 and 250 000. The power vacuum caused by the destabilization of the country's political and social structure has generated a growth in terrorist activity. Militants from extremist organizations have killed and kidnapped clergy and laity and committed terrorist acts in Christian churches. Many believers have migrated to Syria, Jordan and other countries. Christians are leaving Iraq, many are trying to move to Western countries to no longer return to the Middles East.

A similar situation has arisen in Syria, where before the conflict of 2011 more than ten per cent of the country's population was Christian. Almost a million Christians have abandoned the country as a result of the actions of terrorists who have destroyed churches and carried out religiously-based cleansing.

The Russian Orthodox Church has always viewed the rendering of aid to persecuted Christians as her historical mission and has responded to the cry for help from her brothers and sisters. His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Rus pays primary attention to defending persecuted Christians. From 2009 to 2011 he visited a number of Middle Eastern countries: Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Israel, Jordan, Turkey and Egypt. The visits by his Holiness and his meetings with the heads of the local Christian communities were extremely important in order to obtain a correct evaluation of the situation linked to the crisis that was already unfolding in the region. Since then the Russian Church has been visited by many delegations of Middle Eastern Christians and personally by the Patriarchs of the Orthodox Churches of Alexandria, Jerusalem and Antioch, and the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church, the Syro-Jacobite Church, the Church of Ethiopia, the Armenian-Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East.

Upon returning from Syria in 2011 the First Hierarch of the Russian Church appealed to the world community to halt the persecution of Christians in the Middle East and make every effort to preserve the Christian presence in those lands from which Christianity emerged. At the same time, the world's media for a long time continued to ignore the topic, and the region of the Middle East did not cease to become de-Christianized: the majority of Christians had abandoned their homelands.

The meeting between the Primates of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church in Havana in 2016 had historical significance. Thanks to the joint declaration signed by Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill which treated the problem of the persecution of Christians as paramount, the topic of the genocide of Christians was finally discussed at many international forums and became part of the world's agenda.

Soon after the historic meeting in Havana, bilateral cooperation in the humanitarian sphere between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church began to develop successfully. In 2016, with the participation of the Kirche in Not Foundation, a joint Orthodox-Catholic delegation visited Syria and Lebanon, met with local religious leaders, visited refugee camps in the Beqaa Valley and held round-table talks with representatives of the local Churches in Zahle and Damascus. As a result of the visit an illustrated catalogue of destroyed Syrian churches was produced; projects for their restoration are now being developed.

In September 2017 I visited Lebanon where I met with the hierarchs and representatives of the Churches of Lebanon who carry out their ministry in the Beqaa Valley. The aim of my meeting was to discuss the current humanitarian aid in the region and the humanitarian initiatives of the Russian Orthodox Church, including in the context of inter-Christian and inter-religious cooperation. In the Beqaa Valley, located in the east of Lebanon, a great number of Syrian refugees have found shelter. While Muslims have been placed in specially equipped camps, Christians have to rent accommodation in the cities of Zahle and Baalbek.

The Russian Orthodox Church is cooperating also with other Christian confessions in the field of rendering aid to persecuted Christians. In 2017 the Moscow Patriarchate was one of the initiators in holding a world summit in defense of persecuted Christians, which brought the world community's attention to the unprecedented persecution of Christianity. The summit, organized by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association in collaboration with the Russian Orthodox Church, took place in Washington in May 2017. Participating in the summit were representatives of various Christian denominations from 135 countries. Represented were the Local Orthodox Churches, the Roman Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches, as well as various Protestant denominations. The summit was visited by US vice-president Mike Pence, with whom I had a conversation.

In November 2017 the archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby visited Moscow. There was a meeting with His Holiness Patriarch Kirill at which a joint declaration was signed in defense of persecuted Christians. The Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church and the head of the Ethiopian Church Patriarch-Catholicos Abuna Matthew, visiting Russia in May 2018, adopted a joint communique on the same topic. Work is being done too with other Christian communities on joint projects for rendering aid to persecuted Christians.

The object of our special concern in the Middle East remains Syria, which had become the main target for terrorist action. In spite of the fact that their forces have been destroyed, blood continues to be shed in some of the country's regions. Wide-ranging support means that the refugees should be helped to return to their homes. During the conflict in Syria, the Russian Orthodox Church has gathered humanitarian aid for Syrians who have suffered. Donations have been coming in from dioceses, parishes and monasteries, as well as from private individuals from various cities and countries. We have managed to involve a broad spectrum of public organizations in this work.

It is not only Christian denominations that the Russian Orthodox Church has appealed to in the cause of acting together for the Syrian people. Russia's Christians and Muslims have come together for this cause. In 2017 there was set up in Russia an inter-religious working group for rendering humanitarian aid to the people of Syria, made up of both Russian Christians and Muslims. In just over a year several

large consignments of humanitarian aid have been sent to Syria. This aid has been distributed through both the local religious communities and directly to those who need it most regardless of their religious affiliation. Such acts are usually accompanied by holding round-table talks with the participation of leaders of the Christian denominations and Muslim communities of Syria.

From 3rd to 9th February 2018 a delegation of the working group visited Syria and Lebanon. On 3rd February 2018 a round table was held in Damascus with the participation of representatives of almost all the Syrian religious communities. The session's participants on the Syrian side especially noted that Russia's faithful had not remained indifferent to Syria's tragedy and had shown great attention to the needs of her suffering population, adding separately that Russia's actions had changed the course of events in Syria, granting people hope that they will be completely liberated from the terrorists and that peace will be restored.

Within the framework of the mission, acting together with Syrian Christian and Muslim leaders, seventy-seven tonnes of humanitarian aid were distributed. The aid was sent in boxes weighing more than 25 kg for each family. The Syrian side calculated that such a consignment for a family of three or four people would last for at least two weeks. More than 3 000 boxes were put together and distributed to various points in Damascus, Aleppo and the Beqaa Valley in Lebanon. During their stay in Damascus the humanitarian delegation was subject to terrorist gunfire and this continued for the entire two days for the Russians' journey. The mission, however, was not halted and the representatives of Russia's religious communities managed to carry it out to the full. The circumstances under which the humanitarian delegation was fired upon became the subject of an investigation by the UN security council on 7th February 2017. A unique feature of the mission was that the humanitarian aid was distributed in both Christian churches and mosques jointly by Christians and Muslims from both Russia and Syria. In our opinion, and this was recognized by the local religious leaders, the manifestation of this inter-religious solidary became the most important part of the project and had a beneficial effect on the regulating of the political and civil situation in Syria.

The conflict in Syria is drawing to a close and this means that we have to think about the country's restoration. A most important topic is the return of refugees to their homeland. It is impossible to speak of human rights and freedoms without paying attention to this issue. Many refugees are now located in both the Middle East and Europe, including Portugal. They still, though, have their own native towns, cities and villages. Today the process of returning refugees, at least from those countries neighbouring Syria, has begun. Of seven million Syrian refugees who have found themselves abroad, around 240 000 have returned to their homes. In August 2018 alone nine thousand Syrians from Lebanon and five hundred from Jordan returned home. If we consider the number of internally displaced persons, then

one million and two hundred thousand people have already returned to their homes. The coordinating centre for reconciliation of warring parties on the territory of the Syrian Arab Republic is carrying out similar work.

At present there is being developed within the Russian Orthodox Church a programme, the central idea of which is aid in restoring the infrastructure of Syria. We believe it essential to devote attention to the restoration of churches and other religious buildings in Syria, including those belonging to Muslims. Without this it is impossible to hope that the country can return to a proper full life, since it is the holy places – the churches, mosques and monasteries – which are the focal point of deeply traditional Syrian society. For example, in 2013 the Orthodox Convent of St. Thecla in the settlement of Maaloula in the province of Damascus suffered greatly at the hands of terrorists. At present, with the blessing of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Rus, the restoration of this convent with the support of the Moscow Patriarchate has been completed, and the nuns have returned.

We should not forget Iraq, where the religious minorities, including Christians, have been outcasts in their own country for many years and have been subjected to discrimination. In many ways ISIS arose in Iraq as a result of the unstable situation in the country in 2003. In March this year Bagdad and Erbil were visited by my representative with the aim of studying the situation on the ground in close contact with the bishops of the local churches and also of developing programmes of essential aid to Christians and the representatives of the other religious communities of Iraq. It should be noted that the persecuted religious groups of this country consider not only the restoration of their legitimate rights but also the guarantee of a security in their homelands as extremely important. When in Bagdad my representative met with members of the Council of Churches of Iraq in which the representatives of the majority of Iraq's religious confessions participated. In the course of a lengthy discussion they described the calamitous situation which Christians in Iraq have endured over the past fifteen years. Over this period many of them had become refugees three times.

Returning to Syria, I have to state that a distorted notion of the situation has led the West to begin to justify the terrorists as though they are the offended party. At the same time, the calamitous situation of the peaceful inhabitants is often ignored by the media. As an example, we can use the situation in April of 2018 when airstrikes were conducted against Syria. This obliged the heads of the largest religious confessions in the region – Patriarch John X of Antioch and All the East, the Melkite Patriarch Joseph I Absi and the Patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church Mar Ignatius Ephraim II – to issue a statement condemning the bombardment. In their statement the First Hierarchs noted that this aggression "not only destroys the chances of a peaceful political settlement and leads to an escalation in violence and further complications," but also "encourages terrorist organizations and provides them with the impulse to continue their barbaric actions." The process of civil and political regulation of the situation in Syria and the Middle East is impossible with outholding such consultations with the hierarchs of the local

Churches. This is why the Russian Orthodox Church devotes such great attention to the development of links with the Christian communities of the Middle East: we coordinate all of our actions with the local Church hierarchs as we believe it wrong to ignore their point of view.

In April 2018 on the day of the bombardment of Syria, His Holiness Patriarch Kirill, in order to clarify the situation, held an emergency telephone call with Pope Francis, as well as with the all the Orthodox Patriarchs of the Middle East: Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, Patriarch Theodore of Alexandria, Patriarch John X of Antioch and Patriarch Theophilus of Jerusalem. On the same day I phoned the Patriarch of the Coptic Church Tawadros II and the head of the Syriac Orthodox Church Patriarch Ignatius Ephraim II. We discussed the current situation in the Middle East and the possible ways of regulating it. It was important for us to hear the opinions of the Patriarchs of the Middle East in order to take them into account in the future. In this regard I believe to be of benefit Pope Francis' initiative to bring together in the city of Bari on 7th July 2018 representatives of the Churches for a meeting on the situation of Christians in the Middle East. I also participated in this meeting. The meeting allowed us to testify with one voice to our solidarity with the suffering brothers and sisters and to call upon the world community to help Christians in the Middle East. It is precisely in this way that we can act in the spirit of the Havana declaration signed by Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill.

Aid to brothers and sisters in the Middle East is a central task of the Russian Orthodox Church, and our efforts in this area are not weakening. We find active support among the faithful of all of Russia's religions who have been working in this field in solidarity and accord. At the same time, if we are to speak of the task of restoring Syria and an all-round regulation of the situation in the Middle East, then a single Church can not do this alone. The Moscow Patriarchate therefore once more calls upon the world community and the Christian denominations to consolidate their efforts around this task. At the moment we are also developing projects for the restoration of Syria's infrastructure, and we invite our partners to join us in this. Only together can we solve this task successfully.

Source: https://mospat.ru/en/news/47170/