Address by Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk on the Future of Christianity in Europe

On 18 September 2018, in Lisbon, A Junção do Bem Foundation organized a reception in honour of Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations, who is currently on a visit to Portugal. After the reception Metropolitan Hilarion delivered an address on the Future of Christianity in Europe.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I extend my greetings to all of the conference participants. I am pleased today to be among you and have the opportunity of exchanging opinions on issues which have great significance for the Christian view of the world. One of the global problems is the future of Christianity on the continent of Europe. This topic is not only not losing its relevance, but with each year gains ever new resonance. According to statistics, Christianity is today not only the most persecuted religion (at present more than 200 million Christians are subject to persecution in more than fifty countries throughout the world),**[i]** but also encounters new challenges which touch upon the basic moral imperatives and traditional values.

The preaching of the Gospel appeared in Europe for the first time on the shores of the Aegean Sea. During his second missionary journey, the apostle Paul with his co-travelers, among whom was the evangelist Luke, for the first time stepped upon European soil. In Spain the first Christian communities appeared most likely in the first century AD. The apostle Paul in his epistle to the Romans expressed his intention to visit Spain (see: Rom 15.28). He preached in Rome (Acts 28.30-31) and, according to the Christian tradition, the apostle Peter also preached there. By the time of martyrdom of both of these apostles there was already a strong Christian community in Rome. In the second half of the first century Christian communities existed in many cities of the Roman Empire headed by bishops who had been appointed by the apostle Paul and his disciples.

In the second and third centuries faith in Christ continued to spread and was established mainly in those places where it had existed since apostolic times. Christianity, having been firmly established within the Roman empire, extended beyond its borders and was accepted by many peoples in Asia, Africa and Europe.

As we know, this rapid spread of Christian teaching was aided, firstly, by the zeal and self-sacrifice of the first Christian preachers; secondly, by the holy life and behaviour of Christians, their mutual brotherly love, unshakeable resolve, belief in the truth of the Christian faith and, in particular, by the determination and joy with which they endured terrible torments for Christ; and, thirdly, by the miracles which the faithful performed both during their life and during the torments to which they were subjected.

When confronted by the pagan cults spread among the population of Europe, the Christian faith was always the victor. Gradually it became the foundation of people's worldview and of the social and state order. The European state system was built up on the Christian basis, and Christianity became a national religion for the European countries, having had a great effect on the development of the law and public morality. The Middle Ages in Europe were already a Christian period, for at the time various spheres of private and public life were developing in accordance with the teaching of Christ.

The Christian preachers brought to the European continent not only the 'glad tidings,' but also education. The Church became for people the source of literacy, and churches and monasteries – the centers of education. The largest monasteries formed the first libraries, and the clergy and monastics taught the local population to read and to write.

Inspired by the Gospel ideals, the outstanding Europeans created masterpieces in architecture, fine arts, music, and literature. These masterpieces enriched the treasury of the European culture and became the common property of the entire humanity.

After the Middle Ages there came the Age of Enlightenment that discovered new ways and means of perceiving the world. That period saw the rise of science and new forms in fine arts and music. To this day numerous tourists find inspiration in the remarkable pieces of painting and sculpture which are based on the Gospel and New Testament stories, and are preserved in cathedrals in the European cities or are exhibited in museums and art galleries. However, as for the world outlook, that period saw the first signs of Christianity losing its authority as the regulator of social relations. The theocentric worldview model was giving way to the anthropocentric one.

The modern times only reinforced this tendency, with the ideas of secularism, nihilism and relativism in spiritual and moral spheres growing in strength. The very foundations of the life of society and state were reviewed: the state became more secular, and the public morality more dependent on the secular ethics. In Europe these processes were associated with the bloody revolutions of the 17th-18th centuries in England and France. These processes weakened Christianity and changed the religious landscape in Europe.

Nowadays many people living on the European continent do not identify themselves with Christianity. Data research in Great Britain shows that more than half of the country's inhabitants – for the first time in history – do not affiliate themselves with any religion. In an opinion poll conducted by the National Centre for Social Research in Britain in 2016 there took part 2942 adults, of whom 54 percent, to the question of religious allegiance, chose 'no religion.' Among those aged between eighteen and twenty-five the number of non-religious is higher still – seventy-one percent. For comparison, in 1983, when similar research had only just begun, only thirty one percent of respondents said that this did not belong to any religion.**[ii]**

In continental Europe the situation looks similar: data from a European opinion poll conducted between 2014 and 2016 shows that the majority of youth (more than fifty per cent) from sixteen to twenty-nine in countries such as the Czech Republic, Estonia, Sweden, Holland, Hungary, Belgium, France, Finland, Denmark, Norway and Spain do not associate themselves with any religion. In Portugal it is forty-two per cent.**[iii]**

The secular idea, which has taken over an even greater number of minds, is extremely hostile towards religion in general and Christianity in particular. It views religious belief as its ideological opponent.

The philosophical backbone of secular humanism is the notion of the absolute worth of the human person and the presence of universal, so called 'common human' values, which are supposed to be the

foundation of a single world civilization. By ‘common human values’, however, are understood not only the spiritually and moral foundations of all religions which are obligatory for both religious and non-religious people (‘do not kill,’ ‘do not steal,’ ‘do not lie,’ and so on), but also many ideas dubious from the religious perspective and rooted in liberal humanist morality.

Humanist morality proceeds from the notion that the sole factor which can limit a person’s freedom is the freedom of others: what is right is that which does not touch upon the interests of those around us; what is wrong is what impinges upon their freedom. The notion of an absolute moral norm, as well as the notion of sin, is altogether absent in contemporary humanist ethics since it rejects God and the laws he has given for human existence. Yet if morality becomes relative, then freedom becomes permissiveness because only morality is able to limit and guide towards the good a person’s free choice, From the perspective of the religious person, it is far from a fact that everything that does not impinge directly upon the interests of others is truly moral. And true freedom for the religious person is not permissiveness (even if it is limited by secular administrative and criminal legislation), but liberation from sin, the overcoming within one’s self of that that which hinders spiritual perfection.

What, then, is the future of Christianity in Europe in the climate of an increasingly secular humanism and liberal ideas? Research conducted by the Center for the study of global Christianity at the Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary (USA) and the Pew Research Center indicates that Europe will be the only continent in the world where the number of Christians will consistently fall: from 560 million people in 2015 to 501 million people in 2050 **[iv]** (according to the Pew Research Center, from 553 million people in 2015 to 454 million in 2050).**[v]** This is a truly alarming forecast, and it reflects the sad tendencies in Europe’s religious and philosophical picture.

I am asked whether similar such processes are taking place on other continents, for example, America. The authors from the Pew Research Center come to an interesting conclusion: the number of non-religious people in a number of European countries (for example, Great Britain, Germany) is comparable to the number in the USA (twenty-four percent among adults are atheists, agnostics or ‘not decided’). But in practice American ‘non-believers’ turn out to be more religious that some EU citizens who identify themselves with religious population groups.**[vi]** It is a paradox, but Americans, who identify themselves

as ‘non-believers’, for some reason state that they believe in the existence of God. At the same time, in Western Europe this indicator – faith in the existence of God among people who say they have no connection to any religion – hovers from one per cent in Austria, Germany and Great Britain to twelve per cent in Portugal.

The surrender by the Christian churches in Europe of their position is none other than the result of three great defeats in the history of Christianity, each of which became a stepping-stone for the next one. The first defeat was the division of the Christian East and West with the subsequent division of Western Christendom; the second was the secularization of the divided Christian world which ensured the end of Christian states; the third was the adaptation of many divided Christian denominations to secular values and ideologies instead of Christianizing secularized ideology. The accent upon ‘modernization’, which in essence is the secularization of Christianity, was the main reason why Christianity has been more associated with the role of guarding the cultural and historical heritage and has ceased to become a living faith for people. This ‘modernization’ of Christianity is manifested not only in the acceptance but also in the justification of things in people’s and society’s lives which, if we proceed from Gospel teaching, have always been considered sinful.

To our great regret, a number of European Protestant churches have embarked upon the path of their churches’ recognition and blessing of same-sex unions, capitulating before the secular liberal ideas of human rights and freedoms. This latter in the contemporary world is transformed into a force that is sufficient unto itself and tolerates no criticism. Certain well-organized minority groups successfully impose their will upon the majority under the pretext of observing human rights. In essence, human rights have been turned into an instrument of manipulating the majority. The time has come to speak not of liberal ideology but of a secular totalitarianism in relation to those who do not accept it.

Pressure by the secular state upon the churches plays an important role in this. The architects of secular society have attended to the legal aspect of the issue: formally one can belong to any religion, but one will be subjected at best to criticism and at worst to persecution if one attempts to motivate one’s actions with reference to religious beliefs and freedom of conscience. For example, if you are priest and live in a country in which same-sex unions have been legalized, then you have little chance of refusing to marry

this ‘couple’ and at the same remained unpunished by the state. Thus, for example, the Swedish prime minister Stefan Louven has stated that all ministers of the Church of Sweden should be obliged to marry same-sex couples using the following comparison: ‘I would make a parallel with a nurse who refuses to carry out an abortion. If you work as a nurse, then you must be able to perform an abortion, otherwise you ought to go and do something else… The same applies to ministers.**[vii]**

Today we can see how the process of legalizing vice and sin in Europe is rapidly speeding up. The list of such things is getting longer. If at first we were dealing with prostitution and abortion, then countries began to recognize same-sex relationships, euthanasia and transgenderism. At the same time, it would be wrong to say that all of this is happening with the tacit consent of the peoples of Europe themselves. We have seen demonstrations of many thousands of people in Paris against equating the traditional family with partnerships between people of a non-traditional sexual orientation. As a result, a law was adopted granting homosexual couples equal status and rights with traditional families by ignoring completely the ethical aspects of the problem, and protesters were broken up with truncheons and tear gas.

Why, then, has Europe as a bastion of Christianity become today the powerhouse and engineer of these destructive processes and ideas? The contemporary modernization of Christianity in the Western world may be compared to the situation in the Russian empire before 1917. The Revolution and the dramatic events that ensued had, apart from social and political motivations, deep spiritual causes. Faith had been transformed into a formality, a custom that was to be endured. In Russia before 1917 no one, with the exception of a few, could have known that the empire would collapse and that it would be taken over by an atheist totalitarian state in such a resolute way and for such a long time.

His Holiness Patriarch Kirill has spoken of this: ‘The root destruction of the way of life – and I am speaking now of … the people’s spiritual and cultural self-awareness – was possible only because something important vanished from peoples’ everyday lives, including those from among the elite. In spite of outward prosperity and well-being, scientific and cultural achievements, less and less place was left in peoples’ lives for a living and sincere faith in God, for an understanding of the exceptional importance of values emerging from the spiritual and moral tradition.**[viii]**

I would also like to quote the words of a Catholic bishop testifying to the weakening of faith in modern-day European society and the consequences of this process. Cardinal Kurt Koch, the president of the Papal Council for Christian Unity, notes: ‘When we expel God from our lives, then we begin to trample people down.’ He has noted several stages of the ‘expunging’ of Christian values from the European conscience in the modern period. He believes that sixty years ago heralded the beginning of the ‘feeling of a new start’: the anti-Christian ideology of Fascism had been vanquished and ‘religious people’ had now ascended to power in Europe such as Robert Shuman and Konrad Adenauer and others. However, their Christian vision of the ‘new Europe’ was not realized: by 1968 the continent has been overwhelmed by a ‘wave of de-Christianization’ based on emancipation, secularization and Marxism, while the new political elite had turned its back on Christianity. By the beginning of the 1980s the Marxist utopia had been replaced by the anti-utopia of relativism and nihilism, and the role of the Church noticeably decreased – a new stage of Europe’s ‘de-Christianization’ had come. Cardinal Koch believes that today we are witnesses to the third stage when Europeans have found themselves in the ‘grindstones’ of a secular experiment.**[ix]**

Unfortunately, human rights organizations every year document hundreds of cases of various sorts of discrimination of Christians for their beliefs. This problem that Europeans are encountering of course should be a different topic of conversation. Yet I cannot ignore the topic of the discrimination of the new Christians - the migrants from the Middle East and north Africa. They are under extreme pressure from their former countrymen who are Muslims and act aggressively against Christians as a result of the stereotypical thinking and propaganda of radical Islamists. Christians are kept in refugee camps alongside Muslims, which has become the reason why Christians there are assaulted, humiliated, raped and robbed. I call upon all of those who can influence the situation to intervene and show deep concern for the defense of Christians by offering them separate refuge. Christians in their own country have become a persecuted minority, have endured a terrible genocide from radical Islamists in Syria, Iraq, Sudan and other hot spots. And now, instead of being rescued, they continue to endure violence in refugee camps in the EU at the hands of modern-day barbarians who have also ended up as migrants.

Aid to suffering brothers and sisters also bears a direct relation to the issue of the future of Christianity in Europe. We should be optimists and preserve hope that ahead of us will be a time of new opportunities for the testimony of faith.

People of faith must continue their labours at all possible levels in European and international forums in vindicating the right to freedom of conscience and religion, in opposing the development of legal acts which directly or indirectly discriminate against Christians or touch upon the freedom of religion, and in fighting the imposed marginalization of Christianity and its expulsion to the borders of public life.

We believe that the Lord Jesus Christ, who has created his Church in order to carry out his mission in the human world, will not desert us with his all-powerful aid and support: ‘In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!’ (Jn 16.33).

[i] Report for 2018 by the Observation committee of intolerance and discrimination of Christians in Europe. Page 5
https://www.intoleranceagainstchristians.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/publications/files/Report-2018-final.pdf

[ii] The numbers of non-believers in Great Britain exceeds 50% for the first time.
http://www.bbc.com/russian/news-41154931

[iii] Christianity as default is gone': the rise of a non-Christian Europe.
https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/21/christianity-non-christian-europe-young-people-survey-religion

[iv]
http://www.gordonconwell.edu/ockenga/research/documents/StatusofGlobalChristianity2017.pdf

[v] http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/

[vi] 10 key findings about religion in Western Europe. http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/05/29/10-key-findings-about-religion-in-western-europe/

[vii] http://www.intoleranceagainstchristians.eu/case/swedish-prime-minister-priests-should-perform-same-sex-marriages.html

[viii] Speech by His Holiness Patriarch Kirill at the opening of the XXV International Nativity Educational Readings. **http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/4789256.html**

[ix] Metropolitan Philaret of Minsk and Cardinal Kurt Koch spoke at the international conference on the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue. **http://www.blagovest-info.ru/index.php?ss=2&s=3&id=44012**

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