Message of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill and the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church to the Archpastors, Clergy, Monastics and Laypeople on the 1030th Anniversary of the Baptism of Russia

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Blessed is the Lord Jesus Christ

Who came to love new people, the Russian land

and enlightened it with holy baptism

(Tale of Bygone Years)

Beloved in the Lord eminent archpastors, all-honourable presbyters and deacons, God-loving monks and nuns, dear brothers and sisters:

Today the plenitude of our Church is commemorating the Holy Grand Prince Vladimir, Equal-to-the-Apostles, and recalling with gratitude how 1030 years ago, thanks to this chosen man, mighty in spirit, a watershed event in the history of the Slavic peoples took place. By the action of the Omnibenevolent Holy Spirit, the Prince freed himself from pagan delusions, embraced in faith the Only-Begotten Son of God Jesus Christ and, having received the holy Baptism with his brothers-in-arms, brought the salvific light of the Gospel to Rus'.

Why do we call the Baptism of Russia the watershed in the history of our peoples? We do so because it changed forever the entire Slavic civilization and predestined the further course of its development. It was indeed the decisive turn from darkness to light, from wandering in the dark of false ideas to finding the divinely revealed truth and salvation.

The Generous Lord the Lover of mankind granted us the unrivalled mercy and great happiness – the possibility to belong to the Orthodox Church, to make up One Body of Christ and to partake of the inexhaustible "spring of water welling up to eternal life" (Jn 4:14). Thus, we "are no longer strangers and sojourners, but… are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone" (Eph 2:19-20).

We know very little about the life of Rus' before the Baptism. The historical accounts available to us preserved a rather contradictory image of our ancestors as of people, on the one hand, cruel and guileful, and on the other hand, brave and generous. While obeying the laws of blood feud, the Slavs at the same time were people of generous hospitality and greatheartedness. However, during military campaigns a peaceful Slav would turn into a formidable and ruthless warrior: his rage would pass all bounds and for the sake of rich plunder he would stop at nothing.

The Slavic world seemed to stand at a crossroads of good and evil, showing at times either noble qualities of the soul or a dreadful abyss of darkness. A decisive and firm step was needed in order to make the momentous choice. And this choice was made by the Holy Prince Vladimir, Equal-to-the-Apostles. The Orthodox faith implanted in the life our ancestors by the Grand Prince transfigured our people, developing in them the spirit of selflessness and meekness, self-sacrifice and patience.

Over the centuries after the baptism in the blessed waters of Dnieper, Rus' strived to build up its life on the foundation of the lofty Christian ideals and faithfulness to the Gospel, to base its life on what philosopher Ivan Ilyin called "kissing the Cross," that is on the ardent love of the Lord and the awe at His Redemptive Sacrifice. Despite all the twists and turns in our history, despite all the mistakes, deviations and even falls, what our people always put above all was serving to and standing in the Divine truth.

Embracing the Orthodox spirituality was also a powerful impetus for developing the unique East Slavic culture. Prince Vladimir's choice of religion was also the choice of mindset and of the Christian mode of social life and style of the culture. It was the choice of the path that the civilization would embark on. So now we cannot imagine our literature, fine art, architecture or music without the Gospel motives and subjects. Imbued with the Christian moral ideals and values, these works of art lead us to the rich spiritual world of the Orthodox faith, encouraging us to ponder on the eternal questions of human life and its purpose.

However, it is not the belonging to the Orthodox culture by birth only that makes us Christians. Being an Orthodox Christian does not mean paying tribute to the tradition based on the "love for ancestors' graves" and the national history. Being an Orthodox Christian means, first of all, making a conscious choice of our walk of life, means unceasingly seeking Christ and His truth. Just like Prince Vladimir, Equal-to-the-Apostles, who, having "put off the old man with his deeds <…> and put on the new man" (Col 3:9-10), gave his heart to the Lord Jesus forever, we too, remembering "what manner of spirit" (Lk 9:55) we are, are called to be "doers of the word, and not hearers only" (Jas 1:22), and to be quite aware that our "life is hid with Christ in God" (Col 3:3).

To seek the truth of Christ and to stand for it – this is the main precept given by the Holy Prince Vladimir to the peoples of the Holy Rus', heirs of the Dnieper font. Our entire common history and culture, the

centuries-old spiritual and ecclesiastical tradition of our peoples have been associated with seeking this truth. It is at the core of our life and self-awareness; it unites all of us and gives us strength to follow the path of our historical development, overcoming any hardship, sorrow and hatred.

And now in the brotherly Ukraine – the country where there is the sacred Dnieper font in which the peoples of Rus' were baptized, the elements of this world are rising against the Church of the Holy Prince Vladimir, trying to destroy the unity of this holy Church. The clergy and laypeople there are being subjected to unjust accusations and revilement. However, we believe that no pressure from outside is able to shatter the sacred bonds of Christ's love uniting us in one Body of Church. We believe that our common prayer will help us endure all ordeals and preserve the purity of the Orthodox faith and the faithfulness to the canonical truth.

With one mouth and one heart glorifying the Maker for His ineffable mercy to us, let us be worthy of the bountiful love of God and the great spiritual gift which Prince Vladimir, Equal-to-the-Apostles, gave to his people.

By the prayers of this glorious saint, pleasing unto the Lord, may the heavenly Lord bless the countries of the historical Rus' with peace, may He strengthen pastors and all believers in Ukraine who courageously remain faithful to the canonical Church; and may He grant us His unceasing help in following the path of salvation, so that we, "not conformed to this world: but… transformed by the renewing of… mind" (Rom 12:2), may serve God and men, bearing witness to the unfading beauty and strength of the faith of Christ.

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