Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk takes part in the meeting of the heads and representatives of the Christian Churches and communities over the situation of Christians in the Middle East



On 7 July 2018, in Bari, Italy, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations, attended the meeting of the heads and representatives of the Christian Churches and communities over the situation of Christians in Middle East.

Taking part in the meeting were Pope Francis of Rome; Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople; Patriarch Theodoros II of Alexandria and All Africa; Patriarch Tawadros II of the Coptic Church; Patriarch Ignatius Aphrem II of the Syrian Orthodox Church; Catholicos Aram I of Cilicia (Armenian Apostolic Church); Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Gewargis III of the Assyrian Church of the East; Patriarch Ibrahim Isaac Sidrak of the Coptic Catholic Church; Patriarch Ignace Joseph III (Ephrem) Younan of the Syriac Catholic Church; Cardinal Béchara Boutros Raï, Maronite Patriarch of Antioch and All the East;

Patriarch Louis Raphaël I Sako of the Chaldean Catholic Church; Cardinal Grégoire Pierre XX (Krikor), Patriarch of the Armenian Catholic Church; Archbishop Nektarios of Anthidonos, representative of Patriarch Theophilos III of Jerusalem; Metropolitan Vasilios of Constantia-Ammochostos, representative of Archbishop Chrysostomos II of New Justiniana and All Cyprus; Bishop Hovakim of Great Britain and Ireland, representative of the Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians, Karekin II; Archbishop Jean-Clément Jeanbart, representative of the Melkite Patriarch Youssef Absi of Antioch and All the East; Archbishop Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Apostolic Administrator of Jerusalem; Bishop Sani Ibrahim Azar of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land; as well as Dr. Souraya Bechealany, secretary general of the Middle East Council of Churches.

Pope Francis greeted the heads and delegation members of the Christian Churches at the entrance to the Basilica of St. Nicholas in Bari. In the crypt of the Basilica, the Pope, the Patriarchs and the representatives of the Christian Churches venerated the relics of St. Nicholas. After that a prayer meeting for peace in the Middle East took place at a special platform on the seafront in Bari, bringing together thousands of people.

The ceremony was followed by a consultation at the Basilica of St. Nicholas. The meeting was opened by Archbishop Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Apostolic Administrator of Jerusalem, who described the tragic situation of Christians in the Middle East after the American troops' invasion of Iraq. During the discussion the heads and representatives of the Oriental Churches noted that while in a number of countries Christians are not being subjected to persecution, the Christian presence there is being jeopardized and the Christians' rights are being infringed upon, with the governments of the West European countries either not noticing the suffering of Christians or not exert sufficient efforts to defend them.

In his address Metropolitan Hilarion emphasized that the Russian Orthodox Church devoted the highest attention to the situation of Christians in the Middle East. The DECR chairman noted the efforts of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia to protect the suffering Christians. Upon his election to the Moscow Patriarchal Throne His Holiness visited Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, Egypt, Turkey and Cyprus, where he met with local political and religious leaders. The problem of the plight of Christians in the Middle East was at the core of Patriarch Kirill's meetings with Pope Francis in Havana, with Coptic Patriarch Tawadros II and with Patriarch Ignatius Aphrem II of the Syrian Orthodox Church in Moscow. Metropolitan Hilarion pointed out the scale of the humanitarian aid rendered by the Russian Orthodox Church to the population of Syria regardless of what religion the suffering people confess. For instance, in February 2018, 77 tonnes of foodstuff and necessities were sent to the country. As the Russian hierarch noted, it is necessary to create social environment and restore the destroyed and desecrated shrines to help Christians return to the region. At present, with the assistance of the Russian Church, the restoration of the Orthodox monastery in Maaloula is under way. Together with the Roman

Catholic Church, a catalogue of the shrines in Syria which need to be restored was compiled. On the initiative of Patriarch Kirill, a programme was launched, aimed at helping the Syrian children affected by the hostilities.

As Metropolitan Hilarion noted, while there is no Eucharistic unity between the Orthodox, the Catholic and the Oriental Churches, nothing hinders Christians from cooperating and implementing joint projects aimed, among other things, at seeking political settlement in the current situation. “Russia and the Russian Church have never forgotten the Middle Eastern Christians, having rendered and continuing to render assistance to them. We are ready to do all we can to help,” the DECR chairman added.

To complete his address, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk thanked Pope Francis for the initiative to organize this meeting in Bari.

The meeting concluded in the square in front of the Basilica of St. Nicholas where Pope Francis read out an appeal calling for peace in the Biblical land of the Middle East.

DECR Communication Service

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