



## **Representative of Russian Orthodox Church speaks at OSCE high-level meeting on protection of Christians**

December 7, 2017 – A meeting took place at the initiative of Russia and Hungary on the sidelines of the OSCE Ministerial Council meeting at the Hofburg Palace in Vienna to discuss the security of Christians, especially in the Middle East.

The meeting was attended by Russian Foreign Minister S. Lavrov, Hungarian Foreign Minister P. Sijjártó, head of the Chaldean Catholic Church Patriarch Luis Raphael Sako, Vatican secretary for relations with states Archbishop P. Gallagher, Personal Representative of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office on discrimination of Christians and people of other religions I. Gabriel, as well as other religious and public leaders, diplomats and journalists.

On the instruction of Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk as head of the Moscow Patriarchate

department for external church relations (DECR), the Russian Orthodox Church was represented at the meeting by Hieromonk Stephan (Igumnov), DECR secretary for inter-Christian relations.

Father Stephan made a brief report on the efforts of the Moscow Patriarchate to support persecuted Christians in the Middle East, especially in Syria, stressing that for centuries the Russian Orthodox Church considered this work as her historical mission and always responded to her suffering brothers and sisters in trouble.

Speaking about the present situation in the Middle East, he reminded the audience that as far back as from 2009 to 2011, His Holiness Kirill, Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, visited the countries of the region, namely, Turkey, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine and Jordan. These visits took place in the beginning of the so-called 'Arab Spring'. His Holiness met with heads of local Churches. In their turn, visits were made to Moscow by the Patriarchs of Antioch, Alexandria and Jerusalem and the Patriarch of Coptic, Syriac Orthodox, Maronite, Melkite, Syrian Catholic and Armenian Catholic Churches. The Russian Orthodox Church established broad cooperation with each of these Churches, which made it possible to 'synchronize the watches' on the current situation of Christians in the Middle East.

The ROC representative stressed that immediately after Patriarch Kirill returned from Syria, he addressed the world community with an appeal to stop the persecution of ethnic confessional groups in that country on religious grounds, to put an end to the new era of persecution against Christians and to take resolute measures to preserve Christian presence in the lands without which the history and the future of Christianity are unthinkable. Among those who joined the discourse almost immediately after that was the Vatican. At the same time, this problem was ignored by the world mass media for a long time. The Joint Declaration of Patriarch Kirill and Pope Francis made in February 2016 in Havana ran the media blockade of the problem of the genocide against Christians and it began to be discussed on many authoritative platforms and to be substantially included in the world agenda. Of importance was also the Statement of 65 States adopted with the participation of the Russian Orthodox Church on the initiative of Russia, the Vatican and Lebanon at the 28<sup>th</sup> session of the UN Council on Human Rights on March 13, 2015.

Father Stephan noted that, together with giving moral support, the Russian Orthodox Church kept organizing humanitarian actions in aid to Syria all these years. These were fund-raising campaigns by the Church proper, contributions of each parish and monastery and actions carried out with the help of the state and societal institutions.

Speaking about the current work in this area, the speaker said that in spring 2017 the Russian Orthodox Church in the person of Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk initiated a project that has had no parallel in the world so far. With the ROC's coordinating role, an Interreligious Working Group has been set up

and has successfully worked under the aegis of Russia's Presidential Council for Cooperation with Religious Associations. Under this project, Christian and Muslim communities in our country are raising funds and arranging joint supplies of humanitarian aid to Syria. This aid is distributed through both local religious communities and directly to those in the greatest need regardless of their religious affiliation.

Almost each of these actions is accompanied by holding round-table conferences with participation of leaders of Christian confessions and Muslim communities in Syria. In this way, the project participants encourage interreligious and inter-confessional cooperation in that country. Hieromonk Stephan also expressed hope that it will also make an impact on the process of civic and political settlement in Syria.

In addition to the above-mentioned format, the speaker noted, cooperation is successfully developing in this area with the Roman Catholic Church. Immediately after the Havana meeting a joint Orthodox-Catholic delegation visited Syria and Lebanon, met with local religious leaders and visited refugee camps. As a result of this action, an illustrated catalogue of destroyed Syrian churches was compiled, with its first part to be published soon.

'No one can fulfil this task on one's own', he continued, 'In this connection, the Russian Orthodox Church again appeals to the world community to joint efforts for this work. The Russian State has already started to develop a respective program, as President Putin informed Primate of Local Churches during his meeting with them in Moscow. The Moscow Patriarchate will give all possible assistance to its implementation in close contacts with Syrian Churches'.

In conclusion, Father Stephan assured the meeting that 'the efforts of the Russian Orthodox Church to support suffering brothers and sisters in the East will not weaken. They are met with a lively response from the faithful of all the Russian confessions and religious communities, who are acting in this field in solidarity and coordination'.

The speaker thanked the OSCE's meeting for attention to the problem of persecuted Christians and expressed hope that it will also be constant and constructive.

*DECR Communication Service*

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