Presentation by Metropolitan Hilarion at the 2nd Athens International Conference on Religious and Cultural Pluralism and Peaceful Coexistence in the Middle East Athens

On 30 October 2017, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations, addressed the 2nd Athens International Conference on Religious and Cultural Pluralism and Peaceful Coexistence in the Middle East.

Your Beatitudes,

Your Graces,

Your Excellencies,

Dear participants!

I would like to greet you on behalf of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia. Today we have gathered for the 2nd Athens Conference on the situation of religious communities in the Middle East. The Greek Foreign Ministry deserves high praise for its continuing to develop this representative forum which allows us to exchange opinions on the ways of overcoming the humanitarian crisis in the region of the Middle East. Greece has become one of the few countries of the world which has enabled at such a high level to preserve a rich religious and cultural heritage in the Middle East.

Two years ago we discussed here the tragic consequences of the so called Arab Spring for the religious communities. The most vulnerable and persecuted by extremists religious groups are Christians. They represent a threat to no one. However, they are persecuted and killed simply by being Christians. For Christ's Church persecution is nothing new, for throughout many centuries Christians have suffered in innocence in various parts of the world. The Lord Jesus Christ many times stated that Christians would be persecuted in the world: "And the world hath hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world" (Jn 17:14).

The Christian presence in the region of the Middle East and North Africa is an integral condition for the peaceful and harmonious coexistence for representatives of various religions and peoples. Christianity was born in the Middle East, and the contribution of Christians to the formation of a rich cultural and ethnic mosaic in the region is impossible to overestimate. The loss of the Middle East's Christian roots will inevitably lead to unpredictable and sad results.

The extremists and terrorists have in recent times been surrendering their positions. In Syria, thanks to the decisive actions of the Russian army, they have been almost totally destroyed. De-escalation zones are being set up; conditions are emerging for both the return of civilians and for the restoration of the infrastructure and aid supplies. Today we, the religious and political leaders, representatives of the expert community, must together think of what we can do to return Christians to their homelands.

First and foremost it is important to restore churches and monasteries. The church is the centre of a Christian's prayer and social life. As numerous examples in Syria and Iraq have shown, the decision of Christians to remain on the land of their ancestors depends on the presence of a working church building there.

It is a joy that in the ancient Syrian city of Maaloula restoration work is in full swing and some churches are ready for worship. People are returning to Aleppo and Homs, where, with the help of the Russian military, some churches have survived and their restoration has begun. Unfortunately, it is impossible to restore many churches in their original form, since gunmen have plundered them of their most valuable objects. But the main thing is that restored churches are again opening their doors for worship and Christian refugees have the chance to return to their homes.

Unfortunately, not all refugees have a home to return to, since many of their homes have been destroyed or plundered or taken over by other people. This practice was particularly widespread in Nineveh in Iraq, as a result of which the percentage of Christian refugees from Iraq has grown considerably compared with Syria.

Therefore a most important task in the cause of preserving Christianity in the Middle East is the restoration of living accommodation and the infrastructure. The population can return when children have the chance to go to school and when hospitals can once again work at full capacity. Now it is extremely important that the more powerful countries help war-torn countries.

It often happens that in the current aid programmes the interests of Christians are diminished or not taken into account at all. It is essential to assert control over the observing of the right of the religious minorities in the Middle East which must feel solidarity on the part of those countries who are defending international law.

Tomorrow begins today, so we ought not to forget about taking preventative measures against extremism which has actively implanted itself among the peoples of the Middle East in recent years. Religious and political figures throughout the world must combine their efforts to support religious education and to come up with an effective antidote to extremism. In this it is important to interact with

representatives of defense organizations and law and order agencies, since it is penitentiary institutions which are the breeding ground for extremist propaganda. The experience of Iraq evidently confirms this: extremists released from prison made up the core basis for the formation in 2005 of ISIS, the so called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.

The Russian Orthodox Church has acquired great experience in rendering all sort of support to those who suffer in the Middle East.

After the meeting between Pope Francis and His Holiness Patriarch Kirill a number of joint projects with the Roman Catholic Church in support of persecuted Christians were put into effect. These projects are being carried out successfully and are developing. In particular, work is now being carried out on compiling a catalogue of churches destroyed in Syria.

An important aspect of support for the Middle East religious communities is inter-religious dialogue and cooperation. In the Middle East there are located the great holy sites of the three Abrahamic religions, and therefore the issue of preserving religious monuments acquires an especial relevance for all of the communities. The experience of the Russian Orthodox Church testifies that the dialogue of religions is an effective instrument for preserving peace and counteracting extremism.

In Russia there has been set up an inter-religious group for the collection of aid for the people of Syria. Two planes of humanitarian aid have been dispatched to the people of this country. The distribution of aid is enabled by the Russian Centre for the Reconciliation of Warring Parties in Syria. The aid is distributed amongst those who have suffered independent of their faith or nationality.

The Russian Orthodox Church is open to cooperation with all parties interested in supporting Christians of the Middle East. I am confident that together we will be able to achieve the restoration of justice and make our contribution to the cause of protecting the persecuted and the suffering.

In concluding my presentation, I would like to express the hope that the Greek Foreign Ministry will continue the good tradition of holding such forums. The importance of such events for a sure witness to the need of establishing peace in the ancient land of the Middle East is hard to overestimate.

I wish all of the participants of today's lofty forum fruitful discussion and good results.

Source: https://mospat.ru/en/news/48075/