



## **Patriarch Kirill's remarks at the meeting of the Presidium of the Interreligious Council in Russia**

*The Presidium of the Interreligious Council in Russia (ICR) met on October 24, 2017, in Moscow. His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia made the following opening remarks:*

Dear brothers – heads and representatives of the traditional religious communities in our country,

Distinguished government and public figures:

I am glad to greet you at the meeting of the Presidium of the Interreligious Council in Russia.

In the first place, I would like to thank Russia's Chief Rabbi Berel Lazar and President of the Federation of Jewish Communities in Russia Alexander Boroda for the opportunity for holding a meeting of the IRC Presidium here, at the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center.

With great interest I saw the museum explosion. This platform makes it possible with the help of high-tech interactive devices to familiarize oneself with the history and culture of the Jewish people, both the past and the present, including its bright and tragic pages.

Our meeting is taking place on the eve of the centenary of the October 1817 Revolution. This event led to truly catastrophic consequences for religious communities, to persecution of believers, destruction of churches and total anti-religious propaganda. Looking back at the last century, we can see that an unprecedented scientific and technical progress, which offered people opportunities unknown before, could not prevent terrible tragedies that led to millions of victims. What is the cause of it? To a considerable extent, it is a demonstrative and aggressive rejection of religion and desire to build a life without God, which inevitably leads to burying moral values in oblivion.

At the previous meeting of the Council I said that the centenary of the revolutionary events makes it necessary to give them a moral evaluation so that an end could be put to manipulations and sharp polemics continuing to split our society today too. The neglect of tradition and rejection of the religious dimension of human life have led to a moral and axiological relativism expressed, among other things, in the work of authoritarian regimes of the past century. The policy of world superpowers in many cases openly and cynically trampled upon the categories of good and evil. It is clear from the tragedy of the two world wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I think that today we should pay special attention to what the value of human personality means, how far human life can be destroyed, how far dignity can be trampled upon for the sake of political, ideological and other reasons and factors. Human welfare has become

understood as the goal of any public system. This idea has found its expression in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the UN in 1948. But in spite of the fact that idea of human welfare was present in the European culture, philosophy and civilization, the 20<sup>th</sup> century revealed the trample of all that concerns human dignity and human welfare.

In its work the Russian Orthodox Church has given special attention to the reflection on the concept of freedom and human rights in the context of Christian outlook. I have repeatedly raised this topic in my articles, addresses on international platforms, in dialogue with state leaders and religious and public figures. And I have repeatedly stressed that freedom cannot be confused with all-permissiveness and the concept of human rights and freedoms should be complemented with the ideas of moral responsibility. By no means the topic of freedoms and rights should become a subject of political speculations and the building of certain ideological systems, the aims of which is to do damage to its potential or apparent adversary, depending on how one considers it necessary to formulate and define who the adversary is.

By no means can the topic of freedom become a means of struggle. It should be an aim to ensure rights and freedoms and conditions for one's moral responsibility for one's actions. The value of each human personality is based on God's creation of man in His image, which we read about in the first Book of Genesis, and it means that He gave him freedom. By choosing goodness and overcoming evil inclinations, man realizes his freedom becoming free from sin and assuming the likeness of God.

At the same time, **in the religious and secular liberal understanding of freedom there are fundamental differences** relating to the fact that in the secular liberalism there is no category of sin fundamental for the religious consciousness: there is no sin but there is pluralism of opinions and behavior models. Modern philosophy refuses to give a moral definition to what is good and what is bad – both good and evil are reduced to the observance or non-observance of law. To a considerable extent it is conditioned by historical reasons: as is known, the humanistic understanding of rights and freedoms developed in the Renaissance, characteristic for which are a break from biblical values and return to the heathen worldview. **The liberal treatment of human rights and freedoms presupposes the absolutization of the sovereignty of the individual and his rights outside the moral context.** In the Christian perspective, the error of secular humanism lies in its failure to take into account the factor of man's distorted nature, his inclination for evil, the possibility both for the individual and the whole society to use freedom for an evil course.

From the point of view of the Russian Orthodox Church, it is unacceptable when the humanistic understanding the human rights and freedoms is used to assert in society the ideas of such social sinful things as abortion, homosexuality or euthanasia as admissible social norms. There is a direct substitution of notions: **an immoral behavior is justified by the teaching on human dignity having**

**profound religious roots.** Without the religious roots the idea of dignity comes to hang in the air. What is this idea based on, what does it rely upon? If we tear away the religious foundation, if we tear man away from God, then human dignity loses its justification as well.

Can true freedom be expressed in encroaching on what is holy and dear to man? Of course, not. There where provocation and sacrilege begin, human freedom should be consciously restricted. Ignoring the spiritual-moral dimension of freedom inevitably leads to the loss of the very ability to distinguish between good and evil. The lower the level of morality the greater the demand for ideas stirring up low passions in mass culture. At the same time, the crisis of culture is one of the most dangerous for a society, which once again reminds us of the need to correlate all the fruits of God-given gift of creativity with the moral dimension.

As a reaction to the blasphemous caricatures in the French magazine **in January 2015, the ICR adopted a Statement on the Freedom of Speech and Abuse of the Feelings of Believers.** It states in particular:

‘Freedom which has lost moral guidelines and, become an idol and focused only on the meeting of one’s own needs, including the ‘freedom’ of mockery at what others hold holy is incompatible with true human dignity... Freedom needs to have limits, otherwise it becomes violence against others in the form of direct physical impact or in the form of word capable of inflicting a deep wound on a human soul... The freedom of self-expression should not infringe the rights of other people, the honour and dignity of the faithful, insulting what is the most cherished and dear for them. Individual freedom should be subjected to the principles of justice, humanity and common good... All the public figures should be extremely careful with such a delicate sphere as religion and aware of possible consequences of their actions’.

I believe that these words expressing a consolidated position of the traditional religions in our country attest to **our common understanding of the need to link freedom and responsibility.** These words remain relevant to today’s problems and discussions.

Not so long ago, religious leaders from Armenia and Azerbaijan came to Moscow at my invitation to consider possibilities for healing the years-long conflict in Nagorny Karabakh. We adopted a statement stressing the need to protect religious monuments and to respect them. We made this principled statement because we were clearly aware that if somebody infringes on a shrine, a conflict flares up with a new force and the degree of bitterness becomes critical. We made that statement because reports were coming that either side desecrated religious monuments. And then the religious leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan, the countries with very difficult relations, found strength to state courageously that there must be no desecration of religious monuments, buildings and religious tradition because in such a case the political conflict is pumped up with the energy of religious feelings, and it is very dangerous for any

conflict.

I think that the overcoming of the crisis in Northern Caucasus and Chechnya, which used to be very painful, became possible because, among other things, both Muslim and Orthodox leaders stated that there was no religious dimension in that conflict. If, God forbid, the both sides had raised the banner of religious war, the conflict could have continued endlessly. In such a case, it is very difficult to avoid an endless grow of enmity and hatred. At our previous meeting I noted that extremists often exploit the negative reaction of believers to the attempts to impose strange values on them. And precisely those whose feelings are abused often become an easy pray for extremists who call them to 'holy' struggle for the faith and traditional way of life.

In forming its policy and developing law, making decisions on support of certain cultural projects, the state should take into account the moral traditions related to the people's historical and religious traditions. Only in this way the creative development and conflict-free life of society is ensured. If a thorough control over the observance of law with regard to the abuse of religious shrines is not ensured today, then tomorrow we may produce a split socium with an obscure value basis, morally disorientated youth, which will actually deprive the people of a future. It is my conviction that the building of a prosperous society is impossible without consideration for the spiritual needs of its members and respect for people's religious feelings.

The experience of cooperation within the ICR shows that the moral evaluation of social developments made by the traditional religions of our country has proved to be very close. In fundamental issues, our religions disagree with the secular liberal standard presupposing the moral autonomy of man andgnoseological pluralism. In my view, the important task of interreligious dialogue and dialogue between bearers secular humanistic and religious values is to assert the understanding of the need to build a multi-polar world. I use the word 'multi-polar' not in a political but rather a cultural sense meaning a world in which different civilizational poles co-exist in harmony and maintain creative cooperation. The basis for interreligious cooperation in this direction is different externally but essentially it is a common perception by our religious traditions of moral values, absolute and universal.

The liberal secular standard asserted on behalf of the whole 'world community' is seen as the most 'progressive', 'humanistic', 'up-to-date' civilizational model. On the other hand, in spite of the fact that this thesis has proved inefficient, there is still an attitude to religion as something obsolete, outdated and related only to the private life of an individual. The essential influence made by the religious factor on the life of today's society throughout the world and the revival of faith in our country have vividly shown the wrongness of this attitude. I hope that the traditional religious communities in Russia will continue to be

reliable allies and co-workers in the future in the cause of searching for a joint response to common challenges of today.

Cooperation between the traditional religious communities in many areas of societal life is extremely topical today. It is important to understand that today's crises including the ecological one have been generated by the activity of man himself, but their in-depth causes are rooted in the sphere of morality, in the sphere of human spirit. **The use of tremendous technological, scientific, military resources should be related to and made commensurate with eternal God-commanded moral values. In this lies the guarantee not just of wellbeing but also survival of humanity.**

Laid in the cultural experience of humanity is a great diversity. This given, this basic characteristic of our existence, which in the situation of close, mutually depended and mutually connected life of the peoples, becomes an especially important factor in the life of society. It is necessary to find such a **modus of interaction of civilizational models that will lead not to confrontation and opposition but to partnership and mutual enrichment** – the necessary condition for the prosperity of the whole humanity.

In my view, **Russia as a distinctive civilization is a unique example of such unity in diversity.** In today's Russia there are different co-existing and conducting dialogue spiritual traditions and cultural models: Each and West, religious and secular outlooks. Russia has an age-old experience of peaceful and creative cooperation of various peoples, cultures and religions. The history of our country shows that in the face of a common enemy, Christians and Jews, Muslims and Buddhists would close ranks. They all fought side by side defending their common Fatherland. In the years of persecution against believers, they together suffered often showing solidarity and mutual support.

Today, by God's mercy, we live in fundamentally different conditions. Believers have an opportunity to take an active part in all the spheres of societal life: in politics, economy and cultural life; this increases the demand for the level of development of religious education.

Thanks God, we as religious leaders in Russia, have been able to overcome existing differences, working together for the cultivation of the spirit of mutual respect in society. We are building, as it seems to me, a very reliable system of interreligious relations.

We all have happened to hear from our people of the same faith in other countries and our partners the words of admiration for Russia in which there is no Christianophobia, nor anti-Semitism, nor Islamophobia. It is my conviction that we are called to preserve and multiply precisely this property together.

Thank you for your attention.

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