Presentation by Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk at the conference on “Finding the Appropriate Answers to a Long Neglected Crisis”

On 12 October 2017, with the blessing of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate’s Department for External Church Relations, took part in the opening of the international consultation in Budapest on the persecution of Christians. The text of the DECR chairman’s address is given below.

Dear Conference participants,

First of all, I would like to thank the Hungarian government for organizing this important forum and for inviting me to speak before its participants. Hungary stands out among other European countries by its consistent position aimed at the defense of Christian values, as well as by its active efforts in the defense of Christians in the Middle East and North Africa from discrimination and persecution.

We know that in September 2016 the Hungarian government took the decision to set up a department for persecuted Christians. This step was taken as a result of the meetings of the Hungarian leadership with the Pope and the Christian hierarchs of the Middle East. A contribution was made by contacts with concerned European Christian leaders, such as the Austrian Archbishop Cardinal Christoph Schönborn and the Archbishop of Budapest Cardinal Péter Erdő. We understand that Hungary has at times had to go against the current, for the present-day political situation does not help defend the persecuted Christians. I know that the Hungarian people, too, take to heart the fate of Christians in the Middle East.

Hungary has encountered in the communist period persecution of the Church, and so she knows from direct experience what her coreligionists are undergoing today in the Middle East. We, too, in Russia know this feeling of solidarity with our persecuted brothers.

The scale of persecution of Christians in the modern-day world is unprecedented. His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, who devotes special attention to this problem, has called it genocide. Truly, in recent years we have seen all the signs of a total destruction of the Christian community: mass executions, the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of people from their native lands, the destruction of church buildings, monasteries and all depictions of the cross in general.

Today, Christians are suffering throughout many regions of the world. However, the most dramatic

situation has come about in the Middle East and in a number of African countries.

There can be no doubt that the further shrinking of the Christian presence in the Middle East will be a genuine catastrophe for civilization. Western civilization has its roots in Christianity, and Christianity itself in its turn originated in the Middle East.

I would like to devote special attention to the difficulties that Christian refugees encounter. Our constant monitoring of the situation tells us that they often become victims of discrimination even in refugee camps. Unfortunately, radicals manage to penetrate even into these places. This is typical of both camps in the Middle East and in Europe.

Therefore, we call upon political and state leaders to guarantee a control mechanism over the migration flows, which would help protect Christians from discrimination. It is extremely important, however, to remember that religious interests are one of the most sensitive areas of human life and aid to one religious group ought not provoke others into conflict.

According to figures by the Chaldean Archbishop Antoine Audo of Aleppo, one and a half million Christians have already abandoned Syria over the past six years – the community has been reduced by three quarters.

Enormous damage has been inflicted upon churches and monasteries in both Syria and Iraq. The situation has been made worse by the fact that in Syria Christians lived mainly in those areas where today there is heavy fighting with extremists – Hama, Deir ez-Zor, al-Qaryatayn and Idlib. This means that religious buildings and monuments have found themselves in the firing line: many of them have been destroyed. Often terrorists use Christian churches for their own needs, for example, as the stockpiling of weapons. The ancient Monastery of St. Elian in al-Qaryatayn has been wrecked to its foundations by heavy artillery. The same fate has befallen the holy places of the valley of Nineveh, where there are quite a number of Christian cities – Bartella, Qaraqosh, Qarmels and Tel Asqof. All the churches there have been desecrated or obliterated. In the town of Batnaya ninety percent of Christian homes have been destroyed in the course of military action.**[i]**

Official figures show that the number of Syrian Christians officially registered as refugees is very small: from 1.5 percent in Lebanon to 0.20 percent in Jordan, whereas the number of Iraqi Christian refugees make up 16 percent. Along with other factors, this tells us that Christians are not ready to return to Iraq, where no one can guarantee their safety. At the same time, there is a hope that Christians can return to Syria, since the state authorities there have declared their willingness to defend them.

According to current figures, around six hundred thousand refugees have returned to Syria this year,

part of whom are Christians. A large part of these people has returned to Aleppo – a city with an ancient Christian history where Christian communities have lived for centuries. One further encouraging factor is the recent election of a Christian – Sabah Hammoud – as head of the Syrian parliament.

The restoration of infrastructure plays a large role in the return of Christians. However, Syria has for long now been under the effect of sanctions from many countries. In these conditions much effort and time is required to restore at least something. Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church are doing much today for the restoration of the infrastructure and the return of refugees. I believe that we need to unite the efforts of countries and religious communities on these grounds.

Countries that are not indifferent to the fate of Christians of the Middle East could, in order to maintain their presence in the Middle East, enable the restoration of infrastructure and weaken the economic and political pressure on Syria. We may have differing views of the Syrian authorities, but the facts tell us that for local Christians the present regime is a guarantor of protection and safety.

The Russian Orthodox Church has long interceded for suffering Christians and raises this issue in dialogue with authorities and religious leaders.

A most important event for Christians of the Middle East was the meeting between Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia in Cuba at the beginning of 2016. An unprecedented upsurge in attention to the problem of the persecution of Christians was the result of this historical event.

A number of joint projects have been launched after the meeting which are being implemented in direct contact with Christian leaders of the Middle East. The Syrian hierarchs emphasize that the Havana meeting and its final joint declaration was a sign of hope for the Christian population of the Middle East. They believe that the meeting gave a new impulse to the development of inter-confessional interactions among Syria’s Christians and consequently to the strengthening of the Christian presence throughout the Middle East.

A most important place in this project is occupied by the issue of the restoration of church buildings and monasteries which are centres of Christian public life. As experience in Orthodox-Catholic interaction in Syria has shown, for Christians the presence of a church or at least a building for worship has great significance. “I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered abroad,” says Christ to his disciples, quoting the Old Testament prophecy. (Mt 26.31). When a church has been destroyed and the priests have fled, Christians leave in different directions and no longer return. This is well illustrated by the example of the Assyrian villages in the valley of the Khabur River in the north of Syria: after the invasion of ISIS and the destruction of the churches practically nobody has returned to the liberated villages.

The restoration of churches and community centres is one of the key factors that can enable the return of Christians. This was the conclusion of the joint group of British Christian charity organizations in their report on the return of Christians to Iraq. At the same time, the report's compilers noted that the interests of Christians with regard to the Iraqi state's programme for the restoration of destroyed buildings had been neglected.**[ii]**

However, there are some positive tendencies. Two weeks ago, the governor of Nineveh announced that 1400 Christian families had returned to their homes. The Chaldean Church has redirected its efforts from constructing homes for refugees to the restoration of Christian settlements.**[iii]** There is encouraging testimony that priests are returning to these towns and villages and with the help of volunteers are restoring churches.

In Syria the restoration of churches in Maaloula, which four years ago was subjected to terrorist attack, is moving ahead rapidly. The gunmen seized and resold everything that was of any historical value, while the remaining icons, frescos and mosaics were simply destroyed. Now architects and engineers are restoring that which has been lost, and the Churches of the Prophet Elijah and St. Thecla can already be used for worship. This has come about thanks in many ways to the actions of Russia. The setting up of security zones and the maintenance of a cease fire has allowed essential materials to be delivered to Maaloula and people to begin work.**[iv]**

I would like to remark that Russian troops in Syria are striving to protect churches from sacrilege and destruction. Thus, in April of this year in Aleppo Russian sappers cleared of land mines one of the most ancient churches in the city, the fifteenth-century Orthodox Church of the Dormition of the Most Holy Mother of God. It is noteworthy that within this church there were preserved icons painted in Russia at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

Within the framework of the joint work with the Roman Catholic Church there was set up a working group which is now compiling a register of destroyed Syrian churches. We hope that this great labour will soon be completed, which will mean that the restoration of the churches, monasteries and holy places of the ancient land of Syria can be executed at a new level.

This year a working group on rendering humanitarian aid to the population of Syria has been established under the Commission for International Cooperation of the Presidential Council for Interaction with Religious Organizations.

Making up the working group are representatives of Christian (including Catholic and Protestant), Muslim and Jewish communities of Russia, political and public figures and representatives of the military. Within the framework of the working group's activities funds were raised to purchase essential items. At present, two consignments of humanitarian cargo have been delivered to Syria and distributed among those communities who have suffered from the conflict. The distribution of aid is done through the Russian Centre for Reconciliation of Opposing Sides. Part of the aid was sent to a children's hospital in Aleppo and part to the city of Homs. The funds for acquiring the first consignments of humanitarian aid were collected, for the most part, in the Moscow churches in response to the appeal by Patriarch Kirill.

At a press conference in Beirut on delivering the first consignment of aid, the Syrian Christian leaders especially thanked His Holiness Patriarch Kirill, who tirelessly raises his voice in support of the Syrian people and who is the main inspiration for humanitarian aid projects for them.

In my view, this experience of inter-religious relations aimed at helping those in need has very good prospects. The interfaith dialogue ought not be limited merely to supporting peace between peoples and studying each other's religions, even though these mutual interactions are important and needed. Joint work on various projects allows the faithful to know each other better, to feel mutual respect and trust, which naturally enables the strengthening of peace and accord, and which is especially relevant for the region of the Middle East.

I am the representative of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Inter-Religious Council of Russia. The honorary chairman of the Council is His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia. This organization unites the heads of the four traditional religions of Russia – Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism. It ought to be said that the Russian Muslim and Jewish leaders have publically come out in support of Christians of the Middle East. At the last session of the Council Patriarch Kirill especially noted this consolidated position of our coworkers and expressed his gratitude towards them.

One of the most evident examples of international cooperation in defense of Christians in 2015 has been the adoption by the UN Human Rights Council of the Declaration "Supporting the Human Rights of Christians and Other Communities, particularly in the Middle East" which was initiated by Russia, the Vatican and Lebanon with the participation of the Russian Orthodox Church. This document was signed by sixty-five countries. It was the result of the international conference on the Situation of Christians in the Middle East which was held at the initiative of Russia, Lebanon and Armenia.

In the US Congress there is a group of congressmen who have long been fighting for the interests of

Christians. On 19th September of this year they included the Christians of Syria and Iraq in the list of those who the US State Department is aiming to help.**[v]**

In summing up what has been said, we have to highlight the key points essential for the return of Christians to the Middle East and the preservation of the Christian presence. These are: 1. The guarantee of safety for the region's inhabitants; 2. The restoration of churches and holy objects, and the setting up of conditions for a community life and worship; 3. The restoration and construction of homes for Christians and the restoration of the infrastructure.

It is in this field that the Christian Churches and communities could come together ever more closely and show their support to their suffering coreligionists even more effectively. Moreover, this will serve the cause of Christian witness to the world. I propose that the survival of Christianity in its cradle – the Middle East – ought to become the basis for inter-Christian cooperation in the near future.

I believe that today the time has come when countries of the Christian tradition are called upon to unite their efforts and decisively rebuff the misanthropic ideology of extremism. If the Christians of the Middle East feel the economic and political support from the states and peoples of the Christian tradition, then this will strengthen them in their endeavours to remain in their native lands and keep the memory of their forefathers. The Russian Orthodox Church, in having a certain authority and influence, is ready in all ways possible to enable the process of consolidating Christian countries in supporting Christians of the Middle East.

However, at the same time we should not forget the sad experience of those countries who in both the past and the present centuries have interfered in the affairs of Middle Eastern communities. Under the guise of defending Christians these countries have abused their loyalty and tried to extract maximum dividends for themselves by manipulating as an imperative the very subtle spheres of confessional relations. Often these acts have been carried out crudely and unintelligently; disharmony has been brought into what was once a friendly multicultural society, and as a result the defenseless local Christians have suffered the most. The ideologues of extremist groups in their propaganda even today link the interests of Middle East Christian communities to the Crusades, the colonialism of the time of mandates and present interventions which they believe are directed against Islam.

In concluding my presentation I would like to express the hope that today's forum will help us to understand what has been done to support persecuted Christians and how we can unite our efforts and raise the effectiveness of aid. We have already become witnesses to unprecedented inter-Christian solidarity when confronted with the persecution of our brothers in Christ. Therefore, now more than ever it is important to take advantage of the moment and bear witness before the whole world that Christians have not been abandoned to their arbitrary fate, that there are forces ready to support them and share

their witness to the truth and grace which, according to St. John, “came through Jesus Christ” (Jn 1.16).

The Russian Orthodox Church is ready to cooperate with Hungary in various ways in the cause of defending persecuted Christians. By uniting our efforts we can obtain ever greater results than by acting separately. I express the hope that today’s forum will enable us to search for practical ways of supporting the suffering Christians of the Middle East.

[i] Iraqi families urged to return and rebuild homes in Nineveh Plains. https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/03/iraqi-families-urged-to-return-and-rebuild-homes-in-nineveh-plains/

[ii] Christians ‘excluded’ from Iraq’s reconstruction plans. https://worldwatch monitor.org/2017/01/Christians-excluded-from-iraqs-reconstruction-plans/

[iii] More than 1400 Christian families return to the Nineveh Plains – governor. https://www.blagovest-info.ru/index.ph?ss=2&s=3&id=75041

[iv] Churches robbed by terrorists restored in Maaloula in Syria. https:/ria.ru/religion/20170915/1504811533.html?inj=1

[v] https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congrss/house/390

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