Presentation by Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk at the meeting of Committee of Representatives of the Orthodox Churches to the European Union

On 6 October 2017, with the blessing of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, an off-site session of the Committee of Representatives of the Orthodox Churches to the European Union took place at the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate. The text of Metropolitan Hilarion's address is given below.

Your Eminences and Your Graces,

All-honourable fathers and brothers – participants and guests of the Moscow session of the Committee of Representatives of the Orthodox Churches to the European Union,

It gives me joy to welcome you to the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, responsible for international contacts of the Russian Orthodox Church.

The Department for External Church Relations was established in 1946, at a time when the Russian Orthodox Church was trying to escape from the isolation after a long period of the hardest persecutions that had not stopped after the war, but had been mitigated to some extent. At the time the Church got an opportunity to restore its ties with other countries, including with its own flock scattered all over the world. To coordinate the Church's international activities and to cooperate with the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant confessions, the Department was created.

It gives me great joy to greet you here today. The agenda of your meeting and of your everyday work is very familiar to me. For eight years I represented the Russian Orthodox Church to the European international organizations in Brussels, and therefore I am well aware of what difficulties and challenges you face. I hope you will have an interesting programme that will include not only working sessions, but also the participation in the divine service at the Lavra of the Holy Trinity and St. Sergius on the commemoration day of St. Sergius of Radonezh and visits to a number of institutions of the Russian Orthodox Church that will help you learn more about its life. Once again I cordially welcome you to the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate.

A good tradition has been established to hold the Committee's annual offsite sessions in the territory of the Local Churches that have their representations to the European Union. The agenda of the CROCEU

meetings includes such important issues as the protection of human life and the institution of family, the presence of Christianity in the European society, as well as the persecution of our brothers and sisters in the Middle East and North Africa, and the violation of the rights of the faithful. Discussed at our today's meeting will be the solidarity of the Orthodox Church with the peoples of the world in the face of increasing threat of extremism and terrorism.

The terror attacks of recent decades, that caused death and suffering of thousands of people, changed the life of most of the European countries. Several years ago, the European society could not even imagine the scale and consequences of the expansion of extremism which acts under various slogans, including the religious ones. Among the most dreadful attacks committed lately in Europe are a series of attacks in Paris in 2015, the explosions in Brussels in 2016, the vans that ploughed into crowds of people in Nice and in Berlin in 2016, the explosion in Manchester in 2017, and a series of attacks in London and in Barcelona in 2017.

This plague struck our country as well. The latest atrocity was the terror attack in the St. Petersburg metro that claimed the lives of 13 people.

The hypocrisy and cynicism of the terrorists carrying a religious flag in their hands are evident, for among their victims are also representatives of the traditional Islamic leaders. Those imams and muftis who died in Russia at the hands of the criminals were people of different nationalities and generations and belonged to different branches of Islam. However, there was one thing that they had in common – they strongly opposed radical ideas that justify violence by religion.

The dramatic spread of terrorist threat in the world is a direct consequence of the external interference in the sovereign affairs of the Middle Eastern and North African countries. As a result of the so-called "Arab Spring," the forced political regime changes led to civil wars, chaos and killings of civilians. We see these days that the grossest violations of human rights, first of all of Christians, are being committed in the zones of armed conflicts. People are deprived of basic necessities, suffering from hunger and various diseases, and are often subjected to tortures and violence, undergoing all possible afflictions. Believers in Christ are becoming martyrs and confessors. Great many people are trying to save their lives, using all means they can, including the inconceivable ones, to move to the countries of the Old World.

Emissaries of terrorist organizations often cross the borders of the Western countries under the guise of civilians fleeing from war. After that they settle down rather quickly and start spreading their teaching and searching for followers among an émigré community.

To oppose the terrorist threat and to prevent the propaganda of extremist ideas in the religious sphere,

our Church strives to develop the dialogue with traditional religious communities in Russia. The interreligious cooperation is also aimed at promoting peace-making activities and moral values and ideals in society.

The dialogue of religions in our country is also carried out within the framework of the Interreligious Council of Russia. This organization gathers together the heads of the four traditional religions of the Russian Federation – Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism. On February 21, this year, a regular session was held under the chairmanship of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, which focused on the problem of the spread of extremism under religious slogans. I would like to note that we deliberately do not use the term “religious extremism,” since we believe that there is no such religion that teaches to kill people. During the session, the members of the Interreligious Council came to a conclusion that one of the best means to prevent extremism is to overcome ignorance in religious matters by educating people.

It was, among other things, thanks to these arguments that in 2015, with support from the Interreligious Council, theology was recognized as a branch of science. The development of theological education and science in Russia is to contribute to the prevention of extremism in various spheres, in particular, among young people.

We are equally concerned over the violations of rights of the faithful in the geographical centre of Europe – in Ukraine. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church, to which the majority of people in the country belongs, is subjected to discrimination by some political forces and schismatic organizations. In the 21st century, right in front of our eyes, churches are being illegally seized, priests are being beaten and even killed. We are grateful to the Local Churches for their principled stand in support of the canonical Orthodoxy in Ukraine, which they expressed in response to the appeal from His Holiness with regard to the possible adoption of the bills targeted at the Ukrainian Church. In this matter, we rely on the further solidarity of the Orthodox world.

To conclude my address, I would like to wish all of us God’s almighty help in our forthcoming work. As St. Paul wrote in his Epistle to the Romans, “Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification” (Rom. 14:19).

I wish you every success in your work.

Source: https://mospat.ru/en/news/48150/