



## Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk meets with Pope Francis of Rome



September 26, 2017 – Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, head of the Moscow Patriarchate department for external church relations (DECR), met with Pope Francis of Rome, at the Vatican's Domus Sanctae Marthae hotel.

In the beginning of the meeting, Metropolitan Hilarion conveyed to the Head of the Roman Catholic Church a profound gratitude of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia for the relics of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker, which were brought to Russia in May-July thanks to an agreement that had been reached by the Primate of the two Churches in Havana.

The DECR chairman told the pontiff that during the relics' stay in Moscow and St. Petersburg, it was venerated by over 2,3 million people from Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova and other countries. The pilgrims were helped by 14 thousand volunteers. People stood in hours-long lines to venerate the relics of the most venerated saint in Russia. As he noted, the bringing of the relics of St. Nicholas to Russia

became the most significant event in the history of relations between the Roman Catholic and the Russian Orthodox Churches. He recalled the words of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill that none of the church diplomatic actions did as much for bringing East and West closer together as did the bringing of the relics of St. Nicholas to Russia.

There was an exchange of opinions on a wide range of issues on the international agenda. Metropolitan Hilarion drew the attention of his interlocutor to the situation in Ukraine where three bills have been put on the agenda of the Supreme Rada, each aimed at discrimination against the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church. As he stressed, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church enjoys the status of a self-governing Church member of the Moscow Patriarchate; it is independent administratively but preserves the devotional tie with the plenitude of the Russian Orthodox Church. The efforts of those who have authored the two of these bills are aimed to declare the Ukrainian Orthodox Church not the national Church of Ukraine, which it is as it unites most of the Orthodox faithful of the country, but rather a foreign religious organization whose work needs a special agreement of the authorities. Another bill is aimed to perpetrate the practice of raids on and captures of churches belonging to the canonical Church as a result of which over 40 churches have already been captured.

Among the subjects discussed was also the situation in the Middle East. Metropolitan Hilarion stressed that after the anti-terrorist operation in Syria is over, a tremendous work needs to be done to restore destroyed churches and monasteries and to create conditions for refugees to return to their homes. The Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church can unite their efforts in the task of rendering humanitarian aid to Christians in Syria. He stated that joint work has already started in this area. In particular, Orthodox Christians and Catholics work together to compile a full list of churches and monasteries destroyed or damaged by the war in Syria.

In the course of the talk, Metropolitan Hilarion discussed with Pope Francis the results of the official visit made by the Holy See Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin to Russia in August. The meetings and negotiations he had with leaders of the Russian state and the Supreme Authority of the Russian Orthodox Church attested to the close stands taken on the most acute problems relating, first of all, to the struggle against terrorism in the Middle East and the continued conflict in Ukraine.

Under discussion were also the results of the meeting of the Coordinating Committee of the Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church, which took place on the Island of Leros, Greece, in September 2017. The sides pointed to the importance of the new stage in the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue which is to consider basic problems hampering the restoration of unity between the Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church.

They also dealt with other matter of practical cooperation, such as the exchange in the sphere of culture

and students exchange, in particular, the work of the Joint Working Group set up in 2015 for cultural cooperation between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Holy See. Metropolitan Hilarion also told the pontiff about the work of the Summer Institute for the clergy of the Catholic Church, which recently took place at the Ss. Cyril and Methodius Institute of Post-Graduate Studies. On August 30, the attendees of the Summer Institute were received in audience by His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia.

After the end of the talk, which had been held *tete-a-tete* with only two interpreters present, Metropolitan Hilarion introduced to Pope Francis the members of the delegation who accompanied him: Bishop Matfey of Bogorodsk, administrator of the Moscow Patriarchate parishes in Italy, Hieromonk Stephan (Igumnov), DECR secretary for inter-Christian Relations, Hieromonk Ioann (Kopeikin), Ss Cyril and Methodius Institute pro-rector for training; Hieromonk Ambrose (Matsegor), secretary of the administration of the Moscow Patriarchate parishes in Italy; Rev. Alexiy Dikarev of the DECR secretariat for inter-Christian relations, and the Orthodox benefactors who gave an essential support to the Russian Orthodox Church in the project for bringing St. Nicholas's relics to Russia, namely, Mr. A. Guryev, vice-chairman of the FosAgro company board of director, and his wife, and A. Motlokhov, FosAgro general director, and his wife.

In conclusion of the meeting, which lasted over an hour and was held in a warm and cordial atmosphere, Pope Francis and Metropolitan Hilarion exchanged tokens of the meeting.

*DECR Communication Service*

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