



Address by Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk to the Russia in the Heart of Lebanon conference

On September 2017, during his visit to Lebanon, the chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate department for external church relations, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, attended the international conference 'Russia in the Heart of Lebanon', which took place in the city of Chwaya in northern Lebanon. Addressing its participants, the archpastor said:

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I would like to cordially greet you all on behalf of the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church, His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia.

His Holiness Patriarch Kirill visited Lebanon in 2011, and with his blessing I have come today to this blessed land to take part in the celebrations on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of His Eminence Metropolitan Niphon's service as representative of the Patriarch of Antioch to the Patriarch of Moscow.

The Russian-Lebanese relations have an age-old history. They are based on our people's sympathy for each other, mutual aid and support, and respect for the rich spiritual heritage and culture of the two countries. Russia promoted to the propagation of the Christian enlightenment in Lebanon: in the late 19th – early 20th centuries, with the active support of the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society, about twenty Orthodox schools were founded in Lebanon; hospitals were built and Christian churches and monasteries were restored.

For Russian people, Lebanon was linked with pilgrimage to the Holy Land. The faithful used to make journeys on foot to Jerusalem, passed through Lebanese coastal cities and visited places associated with the earthly life of the Lord Jesus Christ. Indeed, we remember from the Gospel that Christ visited the Tyre and Sydon lands and for an Orthodox Christian every land on which the Lord Saviour set foot is holy. And for Russian pilgrims, Lebanon always was and is a holy land. Riding or walking here and then returning to their homeland, our pilgrims preserved forever in their hearts the memory of the hospitality of local people and love and cordiality they met here. Some pilgrims, staying in Beirut or in other cities and villages in Lebanon brought with them Russian spiritual culture and traditions.

In the 20th century the waves of emigration from Russia to Lebanon also contributed to the development

of science and technology and various other aspects of the life of society. Russian engineers, topographers, educators and cultural figures made their contribution to the formation of today's make-up of the country.

Of special importance to the Russian Church are relations with the Patriarchate of Antioch, with which we are tied by the bonds of sincere fraternal love and time-proved friendship.

There are Representations of the Russian Orthodox Church functioning in Damascus and Beirut. The Moscow Patriarchate representation in Lebanon was founded in May 1946 after the visit made to the Middle East by His Holiness Patriarch Alexis I of Moscow and All Russia. This decision was made in response to the wishes of Russian-speaking people living in the Lebanese capital to have an Orthodox parish of their own. To this day this parish is a spiritual and cultural center for the Russian Orthodox community, with not only church holidays celebrated in it but also other dates memorable for the Orthodox people living in Beirut.

In Moscow there is a Representation of the Orthodox Church of Antioch to the Moscow Patriarchal see. It represents Christians in Lebanon and Syria. For forty years now this Representation is headed by Metropolitan Niphon of Philippi, an outstanding son of the Lebanese people.

His Eminence Niphon is a man of unique gifts. In the years hard for the Russian Orthodox Church when she was persecuted, His Eminence fearlessly preached Christ and baptized people at his Moscow parish. He did it in spite of the fact that such activity was fraught with a threat to the security and even life of those who did it. He had no diplomatic immunity at all but he never refused to anyone who came to him asking to be baptized. And he never reported to the Soviet authorities the names of the baptized as they demanded at that time.

His Eminence experienced together with the Russian Church the period of her revival. And this revival was and is unprecedented in its scale and pace. I will give you only a few examples. Thirty years ago our Church had only 6 thousand parishes – today we have 36 thousand parishes. Try to figure out these figures. They mean that for the last three decades we have opened a thousand churches a year or three churches a day. Where and when in church history did a revival happen with such a pace? We had only 21 monasteries in the whole Russian Orthodox Church – today there are over 950 monastic cloisters. Where and when in church history did monastic revival happen on such a scale? We had only three educational institutions, but now there are over 50 of them. There is no data about how many Orthodox believers there were in the Soviet time, but now they are counted by tens of millions.

In the late 80s and early 90s, in many parishes in Moscow a priest baptized daily from 300 to 400 adults and children. And people continue coming to church, and we continue opening new parishes. When I

come to western countries, I am told by some people that Christianity has no future and how in European countries Christian churches are closed, how they are turned into restaurants or set to accommodate mosques. I am told how young people do not want to become priests, to become monks. I say to them, 'If you want to make sure that Christianity has the present and the future, come to Russia and look how we live'.

I would like to speak of Christianity in this remarkable country. It has an absolutely special history, and for centuries Christians have lived here side by side with people of other religious confessions.

So was the case until recently in a number of other countries in the Middle East, but today, literary before our own eyes, the confessional picture of the Middle East, regrettably, is being rapidly and sharply changed not for Christians' benefit. In Iraq only 12 or 15 years ago there were 1,5 million Christians. Today they are less than one tenth of that number. In Libya there was a strong Christian community, but nowadays almost no Christians have remained there. In Syria, in places where terrorists have come to power, the Christian presence is rapidly disappearing. In Aleppo, where there they say half a million Christians used to live, now there are 35 thousand at best have remained. You know this all better than I do. And you know that the so-called Arab Spring was inspired not from within the Middle East states but from without. It was inspired by the politicians and states who say, 'We will come and teach you how to live. We will arrange a democracy for you here' Look at what kind of democracy have all these gentlemen arranged in Iraq and Libya. Look at what kind of democracy they have tried to impose on Syria. If Russia had not interfered, there would have been the same here as it is in Iraq, and no place at all would have remained for Christians.

Russia always was and always will be with the people of the Middle East. And Russia always was and always will be with the people of Lebanon.

Your country occupied a very special place in the Middle East. I would like to address a special word to the Christians in Lebanon: do not leave this place, stay in this land, it is your land. You have a legitimate right to stay in the land of your ancestors; it has been guaranteed to you by the Constitution and the whole history of the country. But it depends, first of all, on you whether your children, your grandchildren and grand-grand-children will live in the Lebanese land. Therefore, do all you can to defend Christianity in this country. Rely on the help of Russia who will never leave Lebanese Christians in trouble. Create large and strong families with many children so that you descendants may live in this land.

You know what trials our Russian Orthodox Church endured in the 20th century. All resources of hell were aimed to destroy the Church. Godless people, who came to power in our country exactly one hundred years ago, wanted to eliminate religion completely and sought to change our spiritual code, our civilizational and cultural identity. But, as Holy Scriptures says, *God cannot be mocked* (Gal. 6:7). Our

people waited for seventy years for a moment when it would become possible to confess the faith freely, and it came.

Therefore, both for our people and for the Russian Orthodox Church the pain that Lebanese Christians feel today, their concern for their future is fully understandable and is shared. Let us walk together along the path of defending Christianity. Christianity proves to be threatened in various periods of time in various countries but we will be really stronger if we always stay together.

I wish you all God's help. I wish you all that you may preserve the Orthodox faith. And if you are with Christ, Christ Himself will be with you.

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