Patriarch Kirill meets with heads of diplomatic missions of Latin American countries in Russia



June 8, 2017 – His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia met with heads of diplomatic missions of Latin American countries in Russia, at the patriarchal and synodal resident in the St. Daniel Monastery in Moscow.

The meeting was attended by sixteen high-ranking diplomats representing Cuba, Paraguay, Nicaragua, Ecuador, Panama, Uruguay, Colombia, Guatemala, Brazil, Peru, Chile, Venezuela, Argentina, El Salvador, Mexico, and Costa Rico.

The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was represented by the director of the Latin American department A. Schetinin.

From the Moscow Patriarchate department for external church relations (DECR), there were Archpriest Sergiy Zvonarev, DECR secretary for the far abroad, and M. Palacio, officer of the secretariat.

Patriarch Kirill reminded the gathering that his first meeting with Latin American diplomats took place in September 2009, soon after the beginning of his patriarchal ministry. ‘I am delighted to have such an opportunity again. I would like to thank the Cuban ambassador Mr. Emilio Lozada for the initiative to arrange this meeting’.

Quite recently, on May 21, 2017, it was 230 years since the Latin America outstanding political and military leader Francisco de Miranda met with Metropolitan Platon (Levshin) of Moscow, who played a considerable role in organizing church life and especially theological education in the Russian Church. ‘It is known that Metropolitan Platon advised that Mr. Miranda visit the St. Sergius Monastery of the Trinity in order to come to feel the spirit of Russian Orthodoxy and to understand the soul of the Russian people’, His Holiness noted, ‘Mr Miranda did so; he left a note in this diary. I was told that on May 21 some of you took the same route, repeating the journey of your Latin American hero Francisco de Miranda’.

His Holiness reminded the diplomats that the history of Russian Orthodoxy in Latin America began in 1901, when the first Orthodox church was built in Buenos Aires. According to His Holiness, today there are Orthodox Russian churches in most of the Latin American countries. Their primary mission is the spiritual and pastoral care of compatriots and, generally, Orthodox Slavs who reside in these countries.

Patriarch Kirill also mentioned his repeated visits to Latin American countries. ‘Before this meeting I counted such countries. I have been to thirteen Latin American countries and not for once in most of them’, he specified.

His Holiness spoke at length about some of these visits. In particular, in 2008, in his capacity of head of the Moscow Patriarchate department for external church relations, he took part in the Days of Russia in Latin American countries. This project also involved an Orthodox choir, a number of church representatives and artistic intelligentsia. ‘The task was to introduce the Latin American public to Russian culture and spiritual traditions. During that trip, I also consecrated the largest Russian Orthodox church in Latin America – the church of Our Lady of Kazan in Havana in Cuba. Negotiations about the building of that church had begun a little earlier. I had then an opportunity to meet Mr. Fidel Castro, who responded with great enthusiasm to my proposal to build an Orthodox church in the Cuban capital city. It was built by Cubans themselves, and the Russian Church took part only in its interior decoration’.

During the Days of Russia in Latin American countries in 2008, His Holiness also visited Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador and Costa Rica, where he had meaningful talks with the heads of these states. For most of them it was the first meeting with a hierarch of the Russian Orthodox Church. ‘It was very important for me that I could feel real problems of Latin American nations, including economic and social

ones. I realized that there were various ways of resolving problems and at the same time saw that the leaders of these countries had an ardent desire to ensure the progressive development of their countries and societies', he stressed.

After the Patriarch's visit to Colombia, an Orthodox parish was opened there, which is actively functioning today,

'Last year, already as Patriarch, I visited Cuba, Paraguay and Brazil', His Holiness continued, 'In May 2016 we celebrated the 45th anniversary of the Orthodox church in Havana. For some time it had stopped functioning as a church, but when the number of Orthodox Russian people increased on the island, an idea emerged that a new church should be built – which was so remarkably realized with the participation of Fidel Castro'.

Patriarch Kirill shared his reminiscences of his visit to Cuba, which took place last year. 'The present President of Cuba Raul Castro attended many events and it gave me an opportunity to know him better, to have long and very meaningful talks with him. I also could see the life of the Cuban people and, certainly, the life of the Orthodox community in Cuba', he said.

From Cuba the primate of the Russian Orthodox Church went to Paraguay. 'That country is tied with our country in a special way. You know of course that after the October 1917 Revolution very many people, who refused to accept the revolution, emigrated and a quite a large group of Russian emigres came to settle in Paraguay. That large Russian community was led by Russian General Ivan Belyaev. It was with a special feeling that I celebrated the Liturgy in our Orthodox church in Asuncion, in which Russian people, who used to live in Paraguay in post-revolutionary years, worshipped. As you know, Russians played a very important role in organizing the armed forces of Paraguay, especially participating in the hostilities in which that country was engaged. The names of many of them are inscribed on the Boards of Honour in the special Hall of Glory in Asuncion, which I also visited. I met with the President Horacio Cartes of Paraguay on two occasions, and he told me much about the contribution of Russian emigres to the life of his society, the development of science, education and armed forces of that country'.

In conclusion to his 2016 trip to Latin America, Patriarch Kirill visited Brazil. He met with then president of the country and Catholic prelates and celebrated the Divine Liturgy with the great gathering of people at the Cathedral in San Paulo, which is under the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Antioch.

The central event of the patriarch visit to Brazil was his celebration of a thanksgiving at the statue of Christ the Saviour on Corcovado Mountain in Rio de Janeiro. 'We prayed first of all for prosecuted Christians, those who are prosecuted today for religious beliefs. We spoke about those who die for Christian faith in the Middle East and North Africa, about Christians who feel that they are restricted in

their right to confess their faith even in the countries regarded as democratic', he related.

His Holiness underscored the importance of that five-day visit to Latin American countries: 'I have always felt, especially at that time, that Russia and Latin America have many things in common. First, the very strong living Christian faith; it is really a faith of millions. Christianity in our country and in Latin America is an important factor of not only people's spiritual but also intellectual life. Just as in our country, in Latin America I have seen overcrowded churches, examples of remarkable Christian mission, also amidst the poor. I noted the great interest in Russia wherever we met with very warm and emotional manifestations of sympathy towards us'.

According to His Holiness, the role of Christian factor is not fully included in the system of development of relations between Russia and Latin American countries. 'I believe the inclusion of this factor is very important because it is what we share and share in the sphere of values at that', Patriarch Kirill stated.

With profound regret His Holiness spoke about the crisis of Christian faith in certain part of the world, primarily in western European and North American countries. 'These countries used to be leaders of the Christian world, but they are ceasing to be such' he continued, 'Unlike them, in Latin America churches are not sold to accommodate some secular institutions in them, nor churches are closed but, on the contrary, are being built in a great number in Russia. We have the religious life on the rise, and it is what Russia and Latin American countries have in common'.

Patriarch Kirill also told his guests about the program of building 200 new churches in Moscow. 'As of today, we have actually built over 40 churches, but we have already begun to realise that 200 churches will not be sufficient, since at the moment when we only start building a church, it already comes to be filled with so many people that there is no room for all of them to stand at the Liturgy on Sunday'. As His Holiness noted, along with worship services, each church is running important social, educational and cultural programs.

'As Latin America and Russia play a special role in the preservation and development of modern Christianity, a decision was made that the first ever meeting between the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia and the Pope of Rome should take place in the Latin American land' His Holiness continued, 'The problems, which emerged in relations between the Churches of East and West, the Orthodox and the Catholics, were to a great extend linked with the historical European context. But they had nothing to do with Russia or Latin America at that time. We as it were inherited the consequences of that division. Certainly, there are difference between the Orthodox and the Catholics today, including theological ones. We are aware of the importance of this issue and support in all possible ways the theological dialogue held between our two Churches. We are not inclined to belittle the existing differences but at the same time we understand that especially Christians in Latin America and Russia have a potential for

attracting the Christian power in solving many problems that disturb humanity'.

Patriarch Kirill stated that the Cuba meeting was not devoted to theological issues but rather to problems of concern for the whole world, for both Christians and non-Christians.

'Precisely for this reason we decided to meet in Latin America, in a country which is far from the history of divisions that took place in Europe. Besides, we wished to underscore that it is impossible to speak today about Eurocentrism or America-centrism in the Christian family, as today other nations, too, play a very important role in Christian work, in solution of problems facing Christians', he stated.

His Holiness told his guests that the meeting focused on the need to protect Christians from persecution and oppression they have encountered today. The patriarch and the pope also touched upon the problem of struggle against terrorism and other urgent topics, including the situation in Ukraine. They underscored the value of the institution of the family and the need to protect human life beginning from the moment of conception. The meeting was summed up in a declaration containing a clear call for the Church to continue its peacemaking work and stressing the need for Orthodox-Catholic cooperation in defending the Christian foundation of the European civilization.

'I should say that after that meeting our bilateral relations have become more intensive' His Holiness ascertained, 'We hope that the Orthodox and the Catholics will make their own, essential contribution to the solution of the problems of concern for humanity today'.

Then the Patriarch mentioned the features the Latin Americans and the Russians share in their perception and world outlook. 'They are based on the commitment to Christian faith, on the one hand, and on the very acute feeling of justice and desire of freedom. It is very typical for Latin American Christians, but also reflects the attitude of the Russian Orthodox people'.

His Holiness expressed the conviction that 'we can make our joint contribution to the understanding of the way in which the global economy should develop. It is quite clear that the modern globalization tends to strengthen the positions of super-rich people who have concentrated colossal material and financial resources in their hands to become a great power beyond the control of either government or people. And then a question arises: what is democracy, if real power is beyond the control of the people and even the government? Millions are suffering from the actions of this power. I believe people in both Latin America and Russia and other countries can feel it'.

According to the patriarch, he has drawn the conclusion from his talks with Latin America heads of state that the topic of socially oriented economy is important for a whole number of Latin American countries. 'It seems to me that the future depends of how effectively we can work together to overcome poverty

and to make the exercise of power in the world more transparent. And certainly, the topic of people's education and enlightenment is very important. As a pastor, I would like to underscore the importance of spiritual enlightenment. I believe, we can and must together advocate the cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity of our countries, because there is a very diverse ethnic mosaic in both Russia and Latin America. It is my profound conviction that together we must promote the propagation of peaceful, mutually respectful relations between countries and peoples'.

In conclusion of his address to the diplomats, His Holiness expressed the conviction that, on the basis of what the Russian and Latin American peoples share, it is necessary to build more intensive dialogue and cooperation on all levels, religious, political, economic and cultural.

Ambassador Emilio Lozada Garcia addressed Patriarch Kirill on behalf of the heads of diplomatic missions. He thanked the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church for the opportunity to meet and talk with him, saying, 'We see in you a man with a very great influence in both the Russian Federation and the Slavic world on the whole. We also see in the Russian Orthodox Church a power that plays a tremendous role in the religious life of our countries. The Church spreads and fosters religious values in Russian society, and for this reason it is of so great an importance'.

The ambassador expressed solidarity with His Holiness's opinion that Russia and Latin America are very close to each other despite the geographical distance. At the same time, the relations between the Russian people and the Latin American peoples are of exclusively peaceful nature, developing in a positive way. 'Together we stand for international law, for the leading role of the UN. We also have a mutual interest in strengthening our cultural and economic relations'.

Ambassador Emilio Lozada Garcia also said it was a great honour for the whole Latin American region that it was in Cuba that the historic meeting between Patriarch Kirill and Pope Francis took place in February 2016.

He also reiterated that the Orthodox communities in Latin American countries, especially in Cuba, occupy a dignified place in society.
During the further talk, Latin American diplomats had an opportunity to ask Patriarch Kirill questions and share their impressions of the talk.

DECR Communication Service

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