Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk spoke at World Summit in Defense of Persecuted Christians



On 11 May 2017, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations, delivered an address at the plenary session of the World Summit in Defense of Persecuted Christians in Washington.

Presenting Metropolitan Hilarion to the participants in the conference, Mr. Franklin Graham, President of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, mentioned his visit to Russia at the end of 2015, and noted that the idea of organizing a summit in defense of persecuted Christians had been put forward in Moscow during his meeting with the DECR chairman.

The chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations greeted all those present on behalf of the Russian Orthodox Church and thanked the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association and its President Franklin Graham for organizing such a large-scale forum aimed at bringing the world community's attention to the terrible tragedy of the persecution of Christians

throughout the modern world.

As the Orthodox hierarch reminded the participants in the summit, the persecution of Christians is not a new phenomenon. “Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake,” our Lord Jesus Christ said (Mt 5:11). The leitmotif of persecution runs through all of his preaching and through all of his exhortations to the apostles. St. Peter says: “Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy. If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye; for the spirit of glory and of God rests upon you: on their part he is evil spoken of, but on your part he is glorified. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men's matters. Yet if any man suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf” (1 Pet 4:12-16).

The Church was universally persecuted throughout the first three centuries of her existence, and throughout the following centuries Christians were also subjected to a great variety of persecution, Metropolitan Hilarion emphasized, saying, “There has almost never been in the history of Christianity a century when they were not persecuted – if not in one region of the world, then in another.”

The twentieth century has highlighted with particular poignancy the price Christians have had to pay for their faith, Metropolitan Hilarion noted. Numerous revolutions shook many countries of Europe, Asia and Latin America, provoking a powerful wave of violence against Christians. In Turkey, the mass destruction of Armenians, Assyrians and other Christian peoples heralded the beginning of the twentieth century. The government of the Young Turks that had come to power initiated a genocide against the Christian population of the Ottoman empire, which continued after its fall. More than a million people were affected by the brutal executions, massacres and mass deportations. The persecution of the Catholic Church in Mexico in the 1920s was brutal and bloody. In the mid-twentieth century the Cultural Revolution in China was accompanied by the mass repression of Christian clergy.

“This year Russia and other countries of the “post-Soviet expanse” recall the hundredth anniversary of the 1917 Revolution, which opened an era of cruel persecution of the Russian Orthodox Church,” the DECR chairman continued, “In the persons of Lenin and Stalin, the authorities initiated repression unprecedented on its scale against their own people. Tens of millions were its victims… The Church gave to the world a great multitude of saints who, as the apostle says, “were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection: And others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment” (Heb 11:35-36).”

As Metropolitan Hilarion noted, “in the twentieth century, the new martyrs and confessors of the Church

of Russia were condemned to death not for any particular personal qualities or acts, not for any particular misjudged actions or transgressions: they were deliberately and systematically annihilated solely because they believed in Jesus Christ as God and Saviour. Christian churches were blown up for no other reason than they were Christian. Icons were burnt on bonfires because the face of Christ was depicted on them… The sad list of countries where Christians were subjected to persecution throughout the twentieth century could go on almost indefinitely… The twenty-first century ushered in a new vast wave of persecution of Christians in various regions of the world."

"Christians today suffer most of all in the countries of the Middle East and Africa," the Russian hierarch said, "Christians have lived in these areas for almost two thousand years. Today they have found themselves in the pathway of the political or economic interests of those forces which are not afraid to use terrorists in pursuit of their goals, pretending that they are fighters for freedom and democracy. The scale of the persecution of Christians, meanwhile, is willfully passed over in silence by the mass media and by the international community."

Metropolitan Hilarion gave a few examples illustrating the plight of the Christian population in various countries of the Middle East. Thus, up until 2003 in Iraq there lived one and a half million Christians. However, after the beginning of the so-called Arab Spring, the majority of Christians have been forced to abandon the country, and at present their number has been variously estimated at between 150 and 250 thousand.

In Libya, the same Arab Spring has led to the almost complete disappearance of Christians. The current leadership has openly declared its indifference as to whether Christians remain there.

In Egypt, after the so-called Muslim Brotherhood came to power, the killing of Christians and the burning down of churches have acquired a systematic nature. Christians have begun to abandon the country. After Abdul Fattah el-Sisi's government came to power, the situation has changed for the better, but to this day explosions occur in Egypt's Christian churches and dozens of people have become the victims of terrorist bombs.

In those places in Syria which have ended up in terrorist hands during the course of the war, Christians have been mercilessly destroyed. And the world would hardly know anything of this tragedy if terrorists themselves had not posted on the internet dreadful scenes of vengeance against Christians who have been publicly beheaded and crucified, and whose families and villages have been butchered. Those who have remained alive have been subjected to torture and various forms of humiliation.

Addressing the participants in the summit, the chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church relations said, "We share the position of Their Holinesses Patriarch John X of the

Orthodox Church of Antioch and Aphrem II of the Syrian Orthodox Church, expressed in their recent joint message marking the anniversary of abduction of the two hierarchs – Metropolitans of Aleppo, Paul and Yohanna Ibrahim. The message states that the Christians of the East want to stay in the land of their ancestors, that the talks of "the civilized world" about democracy must not divert people's attention away from the pressing needs of the Syrian population and from the necessity to put an end to the war in the country, that the financing of terrorist groups should be stopped at once, and that instead bread must be given to those starving. Brothers and sisters, we ought to hear this voice and convey this message to those in power, for it expresses the actual opinion of Christians in Syria."

"The genocide of Christians is taking place before the very eyes of the civilized world community," Metropolitan Hilarion continued, "Until recently, both politicians and the mass media in the west with one accord remained silent about this. Today this "conspiracy of silence" has been broken, and people have begun to speak about the persecution of Christians at the highest international arenas. But even now many of those who try to speak out on this topic are rebuke: "Don't speak about Christians, let us speak about minorities instead." And they attempt to pass the problem over in silence and redirect the subject matter towards a politically correct discussion on tolerance to various minorities, sexual and otherwise."

As the DECR chairman reminded those present, the world knows little of the genocide that has unfurled against Christians in Africa. And yet, in Nigeria and the neighbouring countries terrorists from Boko Haram and nomadic tribes have killed whole villages of Christians. In Nigeria alone extremists recently destroyed nine hundred churches. The authorities in Northern Sudan have dropped bombs on Christians and have subjected them to constant discrimination. Attacks on Christians have taken place in Somalia and Tanzania.

"Our brothers and sisters in Asia, in countries such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Indonesia, India and Myanmar, have had to endure all sorts of suffering and persecution," Metropolitan Hilarion continued.

According to the archpastor, the Russian Orthodox Church was one of the first to speak openly of the persecution of Christians when everybody else remained silent about it. The Moscow Patriarchate from the very beginning of the events of the so-called Arab Spring has expressed serious concern over the situation of the Christian population in the Middle East and Africa.

His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia visited Syria and Lebanon in November 2011. His visit had the goal of, *inter alia*, supporting the fraternal Christian Churches in the burgeoning conflict.

In subsequent years the Russian Orthodox Church has exerted and continues to exert varied efforts to defend the rights of Christians subjected to persecution, Metropolitan Hilarion noted. Not a single meeting of His Holiness the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia and the chairman of the Department for

External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate with foreign politicians practically goes by without discussing the situation of the Christian communities of the Middle East and Africa. The leadership and representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church take an active part in international and inter-religious forums dedicated to the situation in the Middle East.

Metropolitan Hilarion emphasized the important role of the inter-Christian dialogue in rendering aid to persecuted Christians. On 12th February 2016 in Havana the historic meeting between His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia and Pope Francis took place. “The primates of the two largest Christian Churches testified to the understanding on both sides that the situation in the world requires urgent and – as the Joint Declaration in Havana states – coordinated action,” the DECR chairman said.

The Russian Orthodox Church has also defended the rights of persecuted Christians within the context of inter-religious dialogue.

“The manifestations of aggression in relation to Christians in the modern world has acquired the forms not only of physical violence, but also the curtailment of peoples' right to a public expression of their faith, to following their values and openly wearing religious symbols,” Metropolitan Hilarion said, “It is with sadness and concern that we observe the growing process of the dechristianization of the public sphere of the Old and New worlds, which historically have always been important strongholds of Christian civilization. Churches and communities are consigned to being relics of the past and not an equal participant in social processes.”

As the archpastor noted, certain things happening in society which are more and more often recognized as the norm and even encouraged contradict the gospel commandments. The Russian Church is seriously alarmed by the striving of a number of countries to allow the practice of euthanasia. In some countries (the Netherlands, Belgium, Canada, Luxemburg), the patient is legally permitted to die voluntarily. Recently in Italy the discussion of the possibility of euthanasia created much noise. In many European countries and America, the ideology aimed at supporting sexual minorities and the propaganda of the homosexual way of life is actively imposed, often with the help of the media and the educational system.

The Russian Orthodox Church defends the sanctity of human life from the moment of conception up until natural death, and confesses the gospel ideals of marriage and the family, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk emphasized, saying, “The principled position of the Church is that society ought to preserve traditional values and learn how to balance human rights and freedom, on the one hand, with responsibility for the moral well-being of the human person on the other. It is sad that guaranteeing human rights becomes more often a synonym for permissiveness and moral decay. This tendency is a blind alley of social development.”

The hierarch of the Russian Orthodox Church called upon representatives of various Christian confessions not to remain inactive in relation to the sufferings of their persecuted brothers and sisters. “Today, as never before, Christians are required to express solidarity in interceding for the suffering and persecuted, who glorify Christ with their heroism,” the archpastor said.

According to the DECR chairman, the inter-religious cooperation has today acquired a special meaning. “Terrorism is the common challenge to both Christians and Muslims and representatives of other religious traditions. It is essential that everybody understands this clearly. The terrorist's bomb makes no distinction in whom it blows apart: its victims are people independent of their religious allegiance,” the archpastor noted.

As Metropolitan Hilarion emphasized, there are many examples of the construction of a peaceful and harmonious society. Christians and Muslims live side by side in peace with each other in Lebanon and Jordan. Egypt has embarked upon the path of inter-religious dialogue and the uprooting of terrorism. Russia has amassed over many centuries experience of inter-religious cooperation and interaction whereby Christians, Muslims, Jews and Buddhists not only do not have conflicts with one another, but also come together in the Interreligious Council of Russia in order to solve relevant problems and adopt a common position for the defence of spiritual and moral values.

“Today the role of a high-quality religious education is substantially growing,” Metropolitan Hilarion continued, “The terrorists' success is not least of all explained by the fact that in many countries of the world the level of literacy in religious issues is extremely low. People join the terrorists because they do not know the truth about Islam or Christianity. The ideologues of terror are able to convince their followers that Christians are the agents of foreign colonizers and the enemies of Islam, and there is no other way of defending Islam than solely through the annihilation of Christians. And feeble souls fall under the influence of this ideology.”

“We can do many things together,” the chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate’s Department for External Church Relations said in conclusion, “The attention of the world is now focused on our summit. The united voice of the Christian confessions must bear witness to our solidarity with our persecuted brothers and sisters, and call upon the world community to intensify its efforts in combating extremism, terrorism and Christianophobia.”

The World Summit in Defense of Persecuted Christians will continue its work until May 13. The conference organized by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association brought together 800 participants from over 135 countries.

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