'The Violation of Religious Rights and Freedoms: Intolerance, Discrimination and Persecution'

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chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's

Department for External Church Relations

at the 5th European Catholic-Orthodox Forum

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Your Eminences, Your Graces,

esteemed fathers and brothers,

dear organizers and participants of the forum,

May I extend my heartfelt greetings to all those gathered today to take part in the 5th European Forum-Dialogue between the Orthodox Churches and the Council of the Bishops' Conferences of Europe.

Our session is taking place against the background of significant progress attained in Orthodox-Catholic relations. After long preliminary discussions, in September of last year at the 14th plenary session of the Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox

Church an important document was adopted entitled "Conciliarity and Primacy in the First Millennium: On the Path to a Common Understanding for Ministering to Church Unity." These suggestions have given us further cause to develop the theological dialogue between our traditions. I hope that in the near future we will be able to begin to examine the key issue that is the object-matter of our division – the topic of conciliarity and primacy in the Churches of the East and West in the second millennium, including a discussion of the painful theme of Uniatism.

An important event of the past year of 2016 was the meeting between Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia on February 12 in Havana, the first in history between the Pope of Rome and the Patriarch of Russia. In our view, it opened up a new page not only in mutual relations between the Holy See and the Moscow Patriarchate, but in Orthodox-Catholic interaction on the whole. At the end of the meeting a joint declaration was issued which reflected a common vision of global issues that concern our Churches and all of humanity. The Pope and the Patriarch, who had earlier, each separately, touched upon the topics in the declaration, spoke with one voice in Havana. And this voice was heard.

We are clearly aware of the need for joint efforts for a consolidated response to the challenges of modern-day life, including the persecution of Christians living in the Middle East, the secularization of western society, the violation of believers' rights, the crisis of family and other traditional values, and the undermining of morality in both private and public life.

The most pressing issue in the sphere of religious rights is the persecution and discrimination of Christians in the Middle East and North Africa. The situation of Christian communities there can be described as critical. Terrorists in the form of 'Islamic State' and other groupings are committing a real genocide against Christ's followers.

The joint declaration of Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill states: “Our gaze must firstly turn to those regions of the world where Christians are victims of persecution. In many countries of the Middle East and North Africa whole families, villages and cities of our brothers and sisters in Christ are being completely exterminated. Their churches are being barbarously ravaged and looted, their sacred objects

profaned, their monuments destroyed. It is with pain that we call to mind the situation in Syria, Iraq and other countries of the Middle East, and the massive exodus of Christians from the land in which our faith was first disseminated and in which they have lived since the time of the Apostles, together with other religious communities."

Today we observe a terrifying picture: the two-thousand year Christian presence in the Middle East and Africa is rapidly disappearing. According to figures by the Centre for the Study of World Christianity, in 2016 alone there were killed 90 thousand Christians, that is, every six minutes a Christian dies for his faith. Between half a million and six hundred thousand Christians are enduring harassment and restrictions in confessing their faith. This means that the world community has been unable to learn the lessons of the destructive wars of the twentieth century and, as before, places political interests above fundamental human rights.

Today the Christian Churches are not only testifying to the feats of martyrdom of Christ's followers, but are also developing co-operation between themselves with the aim of consolidating their joint endeavours in rendering them effective help. Indeed, as St. Paul says, in Christ's Church "when one member suffers, all the members suffer with it" (1 Cor 12:26). Almost immediately after the meeting between Patriarch Kirill and Pope Francis in Cuba a number of joint events took place within the framework of which representatives of the Russian Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches visited Syria and Lebanon. A joint delegation met with the Christian leaders of these countries, visited refugee camps and implemented a number of humanitarian projects.

Within the framework of this initiative in Brussels on October 12, 2016, and in Geneva on October 13, senior hierarchs of the Antiochian Orthodox, Syriac Orthodox and Melkite Churches passed on letters of Syrian children to the heads of the European Union and high commissioners of the United Nations. Our joint work in this direction will continue.

The Russian Orthodox Church sees interreligious dialogue as an important instrument in the struggle against extremism and terrorism. We are in close contact with our Muslim and Jewish brothers, we are working together for the moral purity of society and defend the interests of believers before the state. In

this we are helped by the Interreligious Council of Russia – a forum where for almost twenty years leaders of the traditional religions of Russia have gathered and discussed relevant issues of social development.

Authoritative religious leaders of both Christianity and Islam are called upon to take a common stand against terrorism. We strive to make constant the notion that Christians in the Middle East are the indigenous population of the region. We are helped in this by the historic and contemporary examples of the peaceful coexistence of Christians and Muslims.

The Moscow Patriarchate continually appeals to the international community to defend the suffering Christians of the Middle East. As far back as 2011 the Russian Orthodox Church held an international conference in Moscow entitled 'Freedom of Religion: The Problem of Discrimination and Persecution of Christians.' Gathered at this forum were religious figures and experts from all over the world. They discussed instances of the persecution of Christians and expressed concern at the situation which had arisen.

We regularly raise the issue of the persecution of Christ's followers at international events. The Moscow Patriarchate insists that these topics be included in the final documents of conferences and forums.

The situation of believers in the Middle East is discussed with political leaders and representatives of the diplomatic community of various countries of the world. In recent years, also thanks to the joint efforts of the Christian Churches and countries, we have managed to achieve the recognition at the international level of the persecution of Christians in the Middle East.

We have been bringing to the attention of the highest state power in Russia, parliamentarians and the Russian foreign ministry both a general picture and the concrete needs of our brothers and sisters in Christ. The Moscow Patriarchate has supported Russia's actions aimed at combating international terrorism. I quote the words of Patriarch Kirill spoken during his visit to Great Britain in 2016: “Today's

war on terrorism… ought to be a common war – it is not merely the business of Russia but of all countries, and we ought to come together to defeat this evil."

We are aware that a possible loss of the Christian presence in the Middle East will have far-reaching consequences not only for the region, but also for the whole world. The ousting of Christianity will be a long term factor for instability and will lead to the collapse of the modern-day international legal system. Therefore, today as never before, a consolidated witness is important of the Churches before the world of the need to adopt urgent measures aimed at protecting the Christian population. The global system of political and international relations is now undergoing serious changes, and therefore we have a chance to bolster within it the protection of the rights and interests of Christians in the Middle East and Africa.

Another problem which worries us is the mass destruction of unborn children in various parts of the world. The joint declaration of Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill states: "We call on all to respect the inalienable right to life. Millions are denied the very right to be born into the world. The blood of the unborn cries out to God (cf. Gen 4:10)."

The issue of abortion is especially relevant for Russia. Unfortunately, our country is among the leaders in killing unborn children. The Russian Orthodox Church and other traditional confessions have exerted much effort in changing the attitude towards the artificial termination of pregnancy within Russian society. On June 2, 2016, the Interreligious Council of Russia, on the initiative of the Russian Church, adopted a declaration on the protection of the lives of unborn children. The document states: "We believe it necessary to change informational policy in favour of asserting family values, large families and giving birth to children. It is extremely important that the media, culture and advertising, which so often exert a decisive influence on our minds, educate in the young generation a respectful attitude towards the sacred gift of life, the ideals of chastity, fidelity, mutual love and sacrifice, and demonstrate a positive image of a complete and happy family." The leaders of the traditional religions have called upon the state to devise a multifaceted policy for childbirth and uprooting abortion.

We are deeply concerned by the marginalization of Christianity in the countries of Europe and in other regions. The Pope and the Patriarch have stated: "… We are concerned about the situation in many

countries in which Christians are increasingly confronted by restrictions to religious freedom, to the right to witness to one's convictions and to live in conformity with them. In particular, we observe that the transformation of some countries into secularized societies, estranged from all reference to God and to His truth, constitutes a grave threat to religious freedom. It is a source of concern for us that there is a current curtailment of the rights of Christians, if not their outright discrimination, when certain political forces, guided by an often very aggressive secularist ideology, seek to relegate them to the margins of public life."

The reasons for these phenomena are rooted in the weakening of faith in the human community, the ubiquitous spread of a consumerist attitude towards life and the environment which, in its turn, leads to the triumph of secularism. A paradoxical situation arises whereby Christians, as representatives of the religious majority, more and more often become victims of intolerance and discrimination in Europe. The Christian Churches and communities and individual believers are subjected to obstruction and mockery.

This attitude towards Christianity was alien to the founding fathers of today's united Europe. Thus, the first president of the Federal Republic of Germany Theodor Heuss stated that Europe stands on three hills – the Acropolis, which gave her the values of freedom, philosophy and democracy; the Capitol, which gave Roman law and social order; and on Calvary, that is, Christianity.**[1]**

A different approach at the beginning of the 2000s was suggested by the authors of the European Constitution in which the Graeco-Roman heritage and the heritage of the Age of the Enlightenment were mentioned, yet the two-thousand- year-old history of Christianity was passed over in silence.

The priority in state policy has been not support for and propagation of traditional values, but the defense of the rights of various minorities, primarily sexual minorities. In time this defense has acquired the shape of a struggle even to the detriment of the majority. The first to come under this blow were the Christian family and married life. In being a union between a man and a woman called to perfection in love for each other, to having children and bringing them up, traditional married life faced an aggressive onslaught of same-sex cohabitation.

As a result homosexual unions are legalized at present in eight EU countries – Belgium, Denmark, France, Luxemburg, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and Great Britain. The million-strong protests in Paris in 2013 against the legalization of same-sex partnerships were ignored by the politicians. People bore placards saying “Love One Another and Give Life”, “The Family is Sacred” and “Mum and Dad are what a Child Needs”. There were cases of peaceful protesters being broken up by the police using tear gas and water cannons.

Consonant with this disproportional reaction were the words of US president Barack Obama. When Pope Francis concluded his visit to the USA in 2015, the American head of state announced that the rights of homosexuals were more important than religious freedom.**[2]**

There are tens and hundreds of instances of the vandalism, desecration, robbery and arson of Christian churches, the destruction of images and crosses, the denigration of and attacks upon priests and clergy in Europe. Many of these crimes are committed by immigrants from the Middle East and Africa, but a certain part of the acts of vandalism are committed by indigenous Europeans.

When speaking of violations of religious freedom and the rights of believers, I cannot avoid the topic of Ukraine. In this country the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church is subjected to regular attacks by various radical groups, which are supported at both a local level and at the state level. From 2014 to 2016 in the regions of Volyn, Rovno, Ternopol, Ivano-Frankovsk, Lvov, Chernovtsi, Khmelnitsky, Zhitomir, Cherkassy, Kherson and Lugansk more than forty church buildings belonging to the Ukrainian Church were seized. The organizers of these lawless actions in some cases held a fictitious 'referendum' among the local inhabitants during which the issue of a community's transfer to a schismatic grouping is decided upon. At the same time, the church's parishioners in this procedure are in a minority, while the fate of the church building is most often in the hands of people of little religious belief or no belief at all.

One of the most blatant cases in 2015-2016 was the conflict surrounding the Dormition Church in the

village of Ptichye in the Rovno region. The so called 'activists' on behalf of the schismatic grouping that calls itself the 'Kiev Patriarchate' repeatedly attempted to seize the village church in spite of court decisions adopted at four levels. There are many facts of the clergy and faithful being physically assaulted with the use of traumatic weapons, and of the repeated blocking of believers inside their church without access to food, water and medicines.

However, the greatest concern is caused by the legislative initiatives proposed by the Supreme Rada of Ukraine. These included a bill aimed at legalizing the illegally seized churches as well as discriminatory initiatives that have the purpose of making the Ukrainian Orthodox Church more dependent upon the state compared to other Christian communities in the country, and even of depriving her of her historical name. A possible adoption of such laws threatens to give grounds for a full-scale inter-confessional conflict in Ukraine.

Against this background we are perplexed and hurt by the hostile rhetoric of the leadership of the Ukrainian Greek Catholics aimed at the Orthodox Church. The meeting between Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill was greeted with great hostility in the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church. On the joint declaration the head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church Archbishop Svyatoslav Shevchuk had this to say: "We have outlived more than one such declaration; we will outlive this one too."

When in July of 2016 the Orthodox faithful from various cities joined a Procession of the Cross to Kiev in order to mark the day of the Holy Prince Vladimir, Archbishop Svyatoslav declared that the All-Ukrainian Procession of the Cross was a political pro-Russian act. The head of the UGCC compared the Procession of the Cross to a "living shield of citizens" and warned that "if from among the participants of this Procession of the Cross there are heard anti-Ukrainian slogans and provocations, then this will spell the end of the Moscow Patriarchate in Ukraine. The archbishop asserted that among the clergy of the Moscow Patriarchate there were "very many cases of behaviour incompatible with the name of citizen of Ukraine, and the Ukrainian intelligence services should take the matter up."

Regarding these declarations, the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate was obliged to make a public statement emphasizing that "these words of the head of the

Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church are not only unworthy of an archbishop but of a Christian in general; aimed at inciting inter-confessional strife and expressed in the form of a political denunciation, they cannot but evoke alarm and disgust in the hearts of the Orthodox faithful. The Unia, imposed by fire and the sword over the course of many centuries, today once more demonstrates its hostility towards Orthodoxy. Again and again, in spite of agreements reached at the price of great efforts at the high level of the Orthodox and Catholic Churches, the Unia positions itself as a force sowing enmity and hatred which systematically and consistently hinders reconciliation between East and West."

That is why we believe that discussion of the issue of Uniatism, begun yet not completed in the course of the theological dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, ought to be continued and taken to its logical conclusion.

In the conditions of the current unprecedented challenges and threats to Christianity, our Churches must consolidate in resisting them, act jointly both in the field of information and in legal aid, both in propagating common Christian values in the public sphere and at the international level. It is essential that we think of elaborating study programmes in our church educational establishments to prepare specialists in the field of the legal defense of Christians, develop co-operation between church legal organizations and monitoring centers, ensure the exchange of experience between Churches in the sphere of resisting aggressive secularism.

The words of our Lord Jesus Christ impart hope that our labours will not be in vain: “ In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (Jn 16:33).

[1] Berger, R. Europas Werte, Europas Wirtschaft. - Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 21 July 2013 (www.faz.net).

[2] Obama Warns Christians: Gay Rights More Important Than Religious Freedom (www.breitbart.com).

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