His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Rus addressed the participants of the gathering in the Church Assembly Hall of the Christ the Saviour Cathedral in Moscow

On 21st November 2016 in the Church Assembly Hall of the Christ the Saviour Cathedral in Moscow celebrations were held to mark the seventieth birthday of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Rus. The First Hierarch of the Russian Church addressed the participants of the gathering.

Your Holinesses, Your Beatitudes,

Beloved in the Lord my brother archpastors,

All-honourable fathers,

Dear brothers and sisters,

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to all of you who have rendered me the honour of taking part in the celebrations on the occasion of my seventieth birthday.

I would to express special thanks to the venerable First Hierarchs of the Local Orthodox Churches. I am moved by your warm words and the attention you have shown me in personally coming to congratulate me in spite of the fact that you are all extremely busy in your labours often tied to resolving the problems which you encounter every day as you carry out your lofty Primatial ministry. I am sincerely grateful to the heads of the delegations present here from the Local Orthodox Churches and their esteemed accompanying visitors. I rejoice that today all of the fullness of Orthodox Christendom is represented.

I extend my heartfelt gratitude for the love and support of the Most Blessed Onuphrius, Metropolitan of Kiev and All Ukraine, the permanent members of the Holy Synod of our Church, their Graces the archpastors and clergy representatives of the city of Moscow.

Every meeting with the Heads of the Local Churches is a blessing for me. It is an opportunity granted to us to contribute to the strengthening of unity within the Universal Orthodox Church. As I look back over the years I can say that in church ministry the most important thing for me was to preserve and vindicate this unity, the faith entrusted to us by the Holy Fathers and concern for the good ordering of church life.

By God's grace my childhood and youth was spent among deeply believing people who exerted a decisive influence on the formation of my outlook on life. My grandfather was a true confessor of the faith: during the years of persecution he spent time in many prisons and was several times exiled, and even later, when he was not incarcerated, he was not allowed to live in the large cities. My father was also repressed and spent time in the camps in Kolyma, and then chose the path of the priesthood, which in many ways determined my own choice in life. The blood of the martyrs and the feats of the confessors from those times inspired us, their descendants, to serve Christ in surrendering one's self.

God bestowed upon me a remarkable teacher - Metropolitan Nikodim of Leningrad and Novgorod. Like the confessors of the twentieth century, the ever-memorable bishop carried out his ministry with courage in firmly opposing godlessness. He laboured for the cause of the Church's unity, striving, as St. Paul says, “to be made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some” (1 Cor. 9:22).

Perhaps the happiest years of my life were the ten years spent as rector of the Leningrad Theological Academy At that time the Russian Orthodox Church continued to live in the restrictive conditions of the atheistic regime and the harsh limitations placed on the Church's ability to organize her life, which not only in no small way was an obstacle to the development of theological education, but also threatened its very existence.

A crucial moment was the year 1988, the year of the millennium of the Baptism of Rus. At first we were obliged to mark this anniversary formally, on a small scale. I then publicly insisted that a wide-scale celebration be organized, and it became a part of history as such, determining the subsequent transformations in the religious lives of people.

Soon afterward I was removed from my beloved Leningrad Theological Academy and sent to serve in the diocese of Smolensk. I do not regret this as I see in these events the action of wise divine Providence. Ministry in the diocese of Smolensk and Kaliningrad enriched me with a new and valuable experience which has helped me up to the present time.

The years of my Primacy and chairmanship of the Department of External Church Relations came at a time of active revival of church life on the territory of the pastoral responsibility of the Moscow Patriarchate. A special role in this process undoubtedly belongs to my predecessor His Holiness Patriarch Alexy II. Then there were built and reborn thousands of churches, hundreds of monasteries,

theological seminaries were opened, the number of clergy increased. Subsequent generations will yet have to evaluate the scale of these great changes.

A result of the fall of the Soviet regime was not only the disintegration of the geographical borders of the world in which the Russian Orthodox Church existed for seven decades. The upsurge in activity of political and nationalist movements in the post-Soviet expanse has brought about various conflicts and has been reflected on our Church.

In the most complex of conditions we have done everything possible to defend the interests of the Church, for the preservation of her historical inheritance and the return of the role that befits her in society. And we have always striven with patience and love to explain our position, sought out understanding and support from the Local Orthodox Churches, for the preservation of the unity of the Universal Orthodox Church was and remains for us one of the most important priorities.

When I ascended the Patriarchal Throne, I continued the cause begun by my ever-memorable predecessor. One of the first, and perhaps one of the most important tasks, was to increase the number of dioceses, especially on the territory of Russia. This was a decision that had long come to fruition, a decision so essential in today's conditions, At first there were those who said that it was not necessary to consecrate new bishops, while in the major dioceses we could simply set up deaneries and give to the deans certain additional responsibilities. But I believed that even the remotest regions also needed a personal episcopal presence. And the important thing here is not so much how practical and convenient it may be but the very essence of episcopal ministry.

Today episcopal ministry involves a great many and varied labours. These are both serving at the throne of God and pastoral care, both administrative work and responses to the challenges which one encounters in the conditions of a rapidly changing world. I always remind newly-consecrated bishops that they ought to be closer to their clergy and the simple people, understand the needs of people, their hopes and problems, to help them in their everyday lives.

Since the times of the apostles there has remained unchanged something in the ministry of a bishop: this is the “edifying of the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:12). To build up the Body of Christ means to gather human beings into the one people of God, the one Church of Christ.

The preservation and strengthening of the church unity is the direct duty primarily of all those who are called to the episcopate and especially to the Primatial ministry. It is precisely the unity of the Church that the enemy of the human race wishes to undermine in striving to bring about division, sow distrust and suspicion and even provoke mutual accusations within the fraternal Churches.

At times one hears that the Russian Church, in taking an active part in inter-Orthodox relations, is concerned not for the common good of the whole Orthodox Church but is supposedly pursuing narrow national or political interests. Sometimes our Church is openly accused of so-called phyletism.

Phyletism is a truly dangerous ideology alien to Christianity when one believes within an ethnic community thar one's ethnic interests are of the highest value, even loftier than unity in Christ and with Christ. Unfortunately, this term – phyletism – is often used to describe something which it is not. It is wrong to confuse phyletism with patriotism, a person's natural love for his homeland, his language, history, culture, traditions and customs.

As regards the Russian Church, she is not the Church solely of Russia. This is a Church which unites millions of Orthodox living in independent countries: Russians, Ukrainians, Belorussians, Moldavians and many other peoples. When the decision is made to ordain someone to the priesthood or elect him to be bishop, we never inquire as to the candidate's nationality. Within our episcopate one can encounter representatives of many nationalities. Her national, cultural and linguistic multi-variedness is natural for the Russian Church, as is the awareness of the fact that the preservation of peace and unity of a multinational Church could hardly be possible without equal respect even for the less numerous peoples that make up her flock.

How important it was to respect the voice of each of the Church's members was reflected in the attitude we took towards the convocation of the Great and Holy Council. Present at all the pre-Conciliar events, the Russian Church for more than fifty years, together with the Autocephalous Churches, participated in the Council's preparation. And the Council was meant to be a visible expression of the unity of the Orthodox Catholic Church. Such a lengthy period of preparation merely confirmed that the attainment of unanimity on certain issues demanded peculiar endeavours and certainly equal respect for all the members of our Orthodox family.

Yet when it became known that some of the Autocephalous Churches would not take part in the Council, then we too were forced to change our plans and not travel to the Council, supporting the idea of its postponement to a later time. I ought to say that this decision did come come easily, but was justified as we could clearly see that the Council with even one Local Church absent would be unable to achieve its main goal of being a visible witness to the world of the unity of the Universal Orthodox Church.

The Council of Crete took place in spite of the absence of a number of Churches. Of course, we cannot but sincerely regret it was impossible for all the Local Churches to take part in it. However, I am convinced that everyone acted according to their consciences – both those who travelled to the Council and those who did not participate in it. In the same way, each bishop acted according to his conscience in signing the documents Some of them put their signatures to them, others did not.

History continues, and we ought to move forwards in strengthening our unity and unanimity. Thanks be to All-merciful God, the Orthodox Church, in spite of the disagreements that arise from time to time, remains as one. The fact that today there are here present my beloved brothers the First Hierarchs and delegations from all the autocephalous Churches, that we receive communion from the one chalice and "that we, being many, are one body in Christ" (Rom. 12:5), is a clear affirmation of that unity.

Unity is so necessary for us, solidarity is so important for us! Christ said: "Upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18). Yet we also recall the awesome words of the Apocalypse: "And unto the angel of the church in Sardis write:... I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die" (Rev. 3:1-2).

We see how the world is rapidly changing and what dreadful persecutions Christians in various regions are today subjected to. "What can we do to guard the Church from fresh traumas?" is one of the most relevant issues that confront us today.

The wars and upheavals in the Middle East have affected many people. The Christians living there not only share these calamities with their peoples, but are also subjected to deliberate persecution at the hands of terrorists. The blood of martyrs continues to flow in Syria and Iraq; degenerates hiding behind religious slogans continue to desecrate Christian shrines, destroy churches, lay waste to monasteries, murder peaceful citizens and drive them from their homelands. Before the eyes of the world a humanitarian disaster is unfolding on a unforeseen scale. In the area where the light of the Gospel was disseminated throughout the world, Christianity is faced with the danger of total destruction.

And today the one voice of the Orthodox Church should never be silent. All of us must together inform the world community of the suffering and pain of our brothers in the Middle East to that through common efforts we may return peace to the much-suffering lands of Syria, Iraq and Lebanon.

I have been greatly moved and touched by the words just now spoken by the First Hierarch of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church His Beatitude Metropolitan Onuphrius of Kiev and All Ukraine. In the temples of the Russian Church at each Liturgy prayers are offered up for the increase in love and the reign of peace in the land of Ukraine. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church is undergoing difficult times and our Ukrainian brothers and sisters, with their difficulties and everyday confession of the faith, remain in my thoughts today on this festive occasion.

Today the Ukrainian Church is being drawn into a great conflict dividing society and she is forced to become hostage to this conflict. Church buildings are violently seized, court decisions are ignored, a

slanderous information campaign is being conducted against the Church, bills are put before the Ukrainian parliament the aim of which is to discriminate against and place in difficult conditions the country's largest religious community. Politicians who not understand the Church's inner life are trying to interfere in and regulate this life.

As a rule, the discriminatory bills against the canonical Church in Ukraine are brought by deputies who support schism, who are Greek Catholics in their faith or adhere to atheistic convictions. Even among the authors of the appeal of the Supreme Rada to the Patriarch of Constantinople asking him to grant autocephaly to the Ukrainian Church the majority of the signatories are Uniates or schismatics.

The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church continues its aggressive and offensive attacks on our Church, as well as on canonical Orthodoxy in Ukraine. The last time this manifested itself was in July when the Uniates actively criticized in the public arena the initiative of the All-Ukrainian Procession of the Cross and, with radical nationalist forces, opposed it happening. Simultaneously, the proselytizing activities upon the ancient Orthodox lands of eastern Ukraine have gathered strength. All of this testifies to the fact that the problem of the Unia, generated by the pseudo-Councils of Florence and Brest, remains a bleeding wound on the body of Christendom.

During our meeting in Havana with Pope Francis in February of this year the final document once more reflected our thoughts expressed in 1993 in the document of the Mixed Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church. These thoughts, and I quote, were that “the method of 'Uniatism' of previous centuries, which presupposes the transfer of one community into unity with another by means of tearing it away from its Church is not the path towards restoring unity.”

The coming together of the interests of the Ukrainian Uniates and schismatics in opposing canonical Orthodoxy in Ukraine became possible on the grounds of radical nationalistic ideology and the politicization of the religious sphere. And this political union in the future may have other consequences dangerous to Orthodoxy. It is no coincidence that the Greek Catholics are actively building churches and conducting missionary work in places where historically they had no flock.

In spite of this complex situation, the flock of the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church is growing, new churches and monasteries are being opened. In preserving her canonical unity, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church is preserving a most powerful potential for peace-making which does not rely upon populist slogans and does not accommodate itself to the political climate of the day. It has as its foundation the power of the spirit of the Gospel, Christ's humility and love.

The Orthodox faithful of the Ukraine are suffering for their fidelity to the basic principles of Church life,

for not wanting to renounce their spiritual freedom and inner independence of their Church life for the sake of passing earthly advantage, for not wanting to forgo the spiritual unity of the Church in Christ in whom “there is neither Greek nor Jew … bond nor free” (Col. 3:11) for the false unity proffered by a nationalistic ideology which in its essence is much more aggressive and destructive than the phyletism condemned by the Church councils.

I would like to use the occasion to thank in the presence of the Heads and representatives of all the Local Churches Vladyka Onuphrius for his courage and steadfastness in vindicating Holy Orthodoxy and for preserving the canonical unity of the Church.

Our Church will never abandon her brothers who find themselves in a difficult position in Ukraine and will never turn her back on them. We will never agree to changes in the sacred canonical boundaries of our Church. For Kiev is the spiritual cradle of Holy Rus in the same way as Mtskheta is to Georgia and Kosovo is to Serbia.

The sin of schism can never be healed through violence and deceit, but through repentance and love in Christ. All of the church body suffers from the painful wound of the Ukrainian schism, and her pain is felt not only in Ukraine, but also in the diaspora and on the canonical territories of the other Local Churches. Each one of us grasps the danger of schism within the Church. This is why the anathema pronounced upon the former monk Philaret (Denisenko) was supported by all the Local Orthodox Churches.

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to the First Hierarchs and representatives of the Local Churches who openly support canonical Orthodoxy in Ukraine.

Within ubiquitous division and the growth of conflict, the Holy Orthodox Church ought not only to preserve assiduously her unity, but also manifest it outwardly, for it is together, and not only together, but together in Christ, that we acquire true strength and lose our vulnerability before the world which abides in evil, before the world whose elements rage beyond the confines of the Church and which strive to invade her.

I would like to say a special word of thanks to His Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople for his endeavours in preserving the unity of worldwide Orthodoxy. I sincerely regret that he could not come to Moscow. I ask the esteemed representative of the Church of Constantinople Metropolitan Emmanuel to convey to His Holiness our warmest feelings and good wishes.

I would like once more to thank all of those gathered here. Your presence and your prayers, dear brothers, are the greatest gift for both me and the Russian Church. But it is not only the Russian Church which rejoices today as she has been visited by a host of First Hierarchs, archpastors and pastors from

various ends of the earth. All of the Church of God exults in participating in our common prayer and our spiritual unity – in that we, as the Apostles says, “stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel” (Phil. 1:27).

Source: https://mospat.ru/en/news/48993/