



Church representatives attend press conference on Modern Challenges to Freedom of Conscience: Russia Perspective

September 21, 2016 – A press conference on Modern Challenges to Freedom of Conscience: Russian Perspective took place in Moscow. Held at the Interfax press center, it was organized by the Russian Association for Protecting Religious Freedom (RARF) with the support of the Hartofilax, a charitable foundation for support of religious organizations.

Among the participants were A. Kudryavtsev, chairman of the RARF Council, K. Dolgov, human rights, democracy and rule of law commissioner of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Archpriest Sergiy Zvonarev, secretary for the far abroad, Moscow Patriarchate's department for external church relations (DECR), Archpriest Lev Semyonov, director of the Religious Education Center of the St. Tikhon Orthodox University of the Humanities, Mufti Albir Krganov, chairman of the Moscow and Central Region Muslim Board, and O. Goncharov, RARF general secretary.

A.Kudryavtsev informed the journalists about the work of the RARF, its aims and tasks, dwelling on the RARF annual report 'Freedom of Conscience and Religious Intolerance in the Modern World'.

K.Dolgov, on his part, stressed that the issue of religious freedom and religious intolerance is highly relevant since there is a global crisis in securing religious freedoms in the world. 'We have thoroughly studied the RARF report. It is an interesting and reliable material reflecting the depth and seriousness of problems encountered in this field in a number of countries'. He spoke about the complicated situation which has developed in the sphere of freedom of faith in a number of countries in Western Europe and the USA.

Archpriest Sergiy Zvonarev pointed out that in the world today there are problems causing special concern in the Russian Orthodox Church. 'In the first place, it is the situation of Christian in the Middle East and North Africa. From the very beginning of the 'Arab Spring' the Russian Orthodox Church has raised her voice in the defense of persecuted Christians. As a results of the change of socio-political regimes in several countries in the Middle East, Christians have found themselves 'in the front line' of the confrontation and become ones of those who with their families have endured the consequences of external interference in the sovereign affairs of national states. As a result of the military actions, the whole region of the world has been rapidly de-Christianized and Christians have been subjected to the

greatest discrimination’.

The situation of Christians in the Middle East was the focus of the meeting between His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia and Pope Francis of Rome. Archpriest Sergiy noted that the meeting, which took on February 12, 2016, demonstrated the solidarity of the two world largest Christian Churches and the common conviction that one cannot reconcile oneself with the genocide of Christians in the Middle East. In the Joint Statement they appealed to the international community to do all that is possible to prevent the ousting of Christians from the Middle East.

Another important problem, he said, is the situation of the faithful of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church: ‘What rights can be talked about if what is at stake is the physical violence towards clergy and parishioners who are driven out of churches by force? And this is happening at the geographic center of Europe! We must speak about it as a glaring violation of the fundamental rights of believers’.

A great concern is also caused by the corrosion of Christian values in the life of today’s Europe. ‘In this region of the world, which has Christian roots and Christian past, we encounter facts showing that the present Europe has become post-Christian’, Archpriest Sergiy Zvonarev said, ‘the ban to wear underclothes crosses and cases of pressure against believers only because they openly state their religious identity point to a deep crisis that has developed in the self-consciousness of European states and legal system in today’s Europe’.

‘The violations we have spoke about today are not only violations of the rights of believers, not only a violation of religious freedoms, but also a global trample on the moral values and the system of moral norms on which the whole humanity stood firm for centuries’, Archpriest Lev Semyonov said.

Mufti Albir Krganov spoke, in particular, about the situation of the Islamic community in Russia and European countries and the positive experience of inter-religious cooperation in the Russian Federation. ‘The authorities in our country act in the direction of preserving and strengthening the time-honoured moral values. It is very important for us, of course’, he stated.

O.Goncharov noted that the RARF annual report represent ‘a balanced view of the problems of religious freedom in the world, to a great extent alternative to the western assessments of religious freedom, and in it lies its values’.

Participants in the press conference also answered questions from mass media reporters.

DECR Communication Service

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