Address by Archimandrite Philaret, vice-chairman of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, at the conference organized by the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society on the sidelines of the 28th session of the UN Human Rights Council

Esteemed participants in the conference, ladies and gentlemen,

The Russian Orthodox Church has been closely following the difficult situation of Christians in the Middle East and North Africa for several years now. Opening a month ago the Bishops' Conference of the Russian Orthodox Church, His Holiness Patriarch Kirill said, "There is a real tragedy taking place before our eyes, a real genocide of the Christian population in the lands from which the Good News spread to the whole world. The scale of this disaster, which has been passed over in silence by most mass media, is to be evaluated as yet."

For almost two thousand years Christians have been living in the Biblical lands of the Middle East; this region is the cradle of Christianity. Today Christians in the Middle East are facing unprecedented persecutions by extremist groups. Using every means, radicals try to shake the centuries-old balance of interfaith relations, to drive a wedge between Christians and Muslims. Extremists' actions inflict suffering both on Muslims and representatives of other religious communities.

However, the Middle Eastern Christians have fallen first victims to extremists who deliberately kill Christians simply for being Christians. The extremists make it clear that they intend doing all they can to obliterate Christian presence from the Middle East.

We are witnessing outrageous violations of such fundamental human right as the right to life. The shocking execution, committed in Libya by radicals this February, has once again shown to the world the horrible face of those who pose a threat to the Middle Eastern Christians. According to eyewitnesses from Iraq, ISIL militants execute Christian children**[1]**. Abductions and executions of clergymen have become common there. Almost two years have passed since the abduction of Metropolitans of Aleppo, Paul (Yazigi) and Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim. Nothing has been known about them since then. The world community has chosen to forget about this case.

Hundreds of thousands of Christians in Syria have been forced by militants to leave their homes. One

hundred twenty five thousand Christians fled Iraq in 2014 alone. Living conditions of refugees are very difficult: this cold winter has already claimed the lives of some of them.

The Christian cultural heritage has suffered irreversible damage. The first thing radicals do after seizing towns and cities is to destroy churches and cemeteries, as it happened in Maaloula, Homs, Ar-Raqqah, Deir ez-Zor and other Syrian cities, and to burn ancient manuscripts, as it was the case in the Iraqi Mosul in summer 2014. All shrines having commercial value disappear without a trace on black markets. We have to admit that many ancient religious artifacts in Syria, Iraq and Libya have been lost irrevocably.

The Russian Orthodox Church takes the pain and sufferings of the Middle Eastern Christians as her own, since she knows from her experience what persecutions for faith are. From the outset, our Church has expressed her firm position concerning the Christian population in the Middle East. We support our suffering brothers and sisters and continue to speak out in their defence. The supreme authority of our Church raises this issue during the meetings with political, public and religious leaders, at various international platforms and forums, as well as in the mass media.

In a situation of increasing discrimination against Christians, the inter-Christian cooperation acquires particular importance. Cooperation with the Roman Catholic Church may become especially fruitful, since many Catholics reside in the Middle East and since the Holy See traditionally enjoys authority at the global level.

It is a priority task for the Russian Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Churches to seek peace in the Middle East. The willingness to promote cooperation in this area was re-affirmed at the meetings of Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations, with Pope Francis and Pietro Cardinal Parolin, Secretary of State of the Holy See, which took place in October 2014 in the Vatican.

It should be noted that Christian communities in the Middle East, including Catholic ones, give a high value to the peacemaking role of the Moscow Patriarchate, as was evidenced, for instance, by the meeting of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia with a delegation of Syrian hierarchs, including representatives of the Melkite and the Maronite Churches, held in October 2013. Among other significant events were visits to Moscow of Mar Béchara Boutros Cardinal Al-Raï, Patriarch of the Maronite Church, in February 2013, and of Mor Ignatius Joseph III Younan, Patriarch of the Syrian Catholic Church, in June 2014.

The Catholicos-Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East, Mar Dinkha IV, paid an official visit to Moscow in late May 2014, and Patriarch Tawadros II of the Coptic Church visited Moscow in late

October 2014. Both Primates held productive meetings with His Holiness Patriarch Kirill and the Russian statesmen.

Considerable support has been provided to the Middle Eastern Christians by the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society which maintains close cooperation with the Moscow Patriarchate. With the blessing of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, a great many faithful in Russia responded to the call of this organization to collect humanitarian aid for the people of Syria.

The loss of Christian presence in the Middle East will only lead to further escalation of tensions and violence. The killings of Christians will have long-term consequences, disrupting the existing balance of interfaith relations. That is why our top priority task is to put an end to the aggression of extremists in order to enable Christians and representatives of other traditional religious communities to return to peaceful life.

[1] Canon Andrew White, Chaplain of the Anglican Church in Iraq, repeatedly spoke about the killings of Christians' children in the country. Mr. White is currently living in Jerusalem.

Source: https://mospat.ru/en/news/50593/