DECR vice-chairman takes part in conference on protection of Christians in the Middle East



On 2 March 2015, an International Conference on the Situation of Christians in the Middle East took place in Geneva on the sidelines of the 28th session of the UN Human Rights Council. The conference was convened on the initiative of Russia, Lebanon, Armenia, and a non-governmental organization, Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society, with the participation of the Paris Institute of Democracy and Cooperation and with the assistance of Russia's permanent representation to the United Nations and other international organizations in Geneva.

With the blessing of Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations, Archimandrite Philaret (Bulekov), DECR vice-chairman, took part in the conference.

Speaking at the opening of the conference, Mr. Sergey Lavrov, Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs, honorary member of the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society, called resolutely to put an end to the persecution of Christians in the Middle East and all over the world. Addressing all those present in the hall of the Palace of Nations, he said, in particular, "The exodus of Christians from the Middle Eastern region is a process that might have the most negative consequences… for the preservation of historical and spiritual heritage, important for the whole humanity. I am convinced that it is necessary to multiply efforts in order to put an end to persecutions of Christians and followers of any other religion."

The Minister also mentioned the problems Christians were confronted with in a number of Western countries. "For some reason, it is not considered politically correct now to speak about one's adherence to the Christian religion; people begin to feel awkward about Christian values which make up the foundation of the European civilization… The notions of morality and traditional national, cultural and religious identity are being eroded. Increasing are cases of vandalism and desecration of churches, sacred sites, cemeteries, and Christian symbols," Mr. Lavrov said.

Speaking on the growing tendencies of aggressive secularism, the Minister noted that the faithful found it ever more difficult to uphold their beliefs. "History teaches us that a civilization that has rejected its moral ideals looses its spiritual power," he said, "We all must bear it in mind, especially this year when we celebrate the 70th anniversary of the great victory in World War II which claimed the lives of tens of millions of people of all nationalities and confessions. It is our common duty for the sake of future generations not to betray the feat of the victors and to be uncompromising in opposing any attempts to stir up enmity and hatred."

Among the speakers was also Archimandrite Philaret (Bulekov), vice-chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations. In his address, Archimandrite Philaret reminded all those present that the Russian Orthodox Church knew from her experience what persecutions for faith were and therefore she took the pain and sufferings of the Middle Eastern Christians as her own. He said, in particular, "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."

"The loss of Christian presence in the Middle East will only lead to further escalation of tensions and violence," the DECR vice-chairman continued, "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."

Among those who spoke at the conference were also Ms. Elena Agapova, vice-chairman of the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society; nun Agnes Mariam el-Salib, renown Syrian human rights advocate; Ms. Natalia Narochnitskaya, President of the Paris Institute of Democracy and Cooperation, member of the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society's Board; and Mr. Adriano Roccucci, Secretary General of the Catholic Community of Sant'Egidio.

The meeting was also attended by Archbishop Michael of Geneva and Western Europe; archpriest Mikhail Gundyaev, representative of the Russian Orthodox Church at the World Council of Churches and international organizations in Geneva; and Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, Permanent Representative of the Holy See to the United Nations in Geneva. Prof. John Laughland, Director of Research Programmes at the Institute of Democracy and Cooperation, acted as moderator of the conference.

DECR Communication Service

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