



Speech by Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk at the Forum of Representatives of the Russia – USA forum of Christian leaders

Dear Mr. Graham,

Dear Participants in the Forum:

Our meeting today has gathered around a single table representatives of Christian Churches in the United States of America and members of Christian Churches from Russia.

For the Russian Orthodox Church, the present Forum is important from the perspective of development of its relations with those Christian confessions in the American continent which adhere to traditional ethical principles.

These relations have a long history, beginning in the 18th century with the arrival of the monks of the Valamo Monastery, Herman and Juvenaly, to the shores of America and the subsequent establishment of a diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church in the United States.

The establishment of the first contacts with American Christians goes back to the second part of the 19th century. Through the efforts of Bishop Tikhon (Belavin) of North America and Alaska – later the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia - by the beginning of the 20th century relations between the Russian Orthodox Church and American Anglicans and people of other Protestant Churches in the USA had become truly fraternal. After a certain interval between the two World Wars, we entered a new, ever more intensive stage of our cooperation.

From 1963, the Moscow Patriarchate resumed its relations with the Episcopal Church in the USA. There were several rounds of joint theological discussions. In 1989, a bilateral Coordinating Committee was set up. It held sixteen meetings in the subsequent decade. The Russian Orthodox Church did not hold dialogue with other Christian confessions at such a high level than in this instance.

We appreciated greatly our relations with the United Methodist Church in the USA, which developed both on a bilateral level and in our joint work in ecumenical organizations. Being the largest confessions represented in the World Council of Churches, during the meetings of the WCC Central Committee, we

invariably arranged a special joint dinner to discuss the current agenda and often reached a common standpoint on particular issues.

Among the vivid testimonies to the good cooperation between the Moscow Patriarchate and American Christians is our friendship with Billy Graham's Evangelistic Association, the founder of which has visited Russia several times. We appreciated the understanding that representatives of the Association and the Rev. Graham personally expressed towards the stand taken by the Russian Orthodox Church in various historical periods. I think it is no coincidence that our present Forum, too, has been initiated by precisely this Association.

A special mention should be made of the participation of American Orthodox Christians in the work of the National Council of the Church of Christ in the USA since its inception in 1950. From 1956, the Russian Orthodox Church participated in regular exchanges of delegations with the NCCC. And from 1970, the Council was joined by the Russian Orthodox Church's Patriarchal Parishes in the United States.

That period also saw a very intensive development of our contacts with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the USA and the Church of the Brethren.

Unfortunately, by the end of the 20th century, the relationship of the Moscow Patriarchate with many Christian communities in the USA had encountered a serious crisis. It was caused by the liberalization of the moral teaching in these communities, their deviation from the ethical norms laid down by Holy Scripture of the New Testament common for us all. Thus, in 2003 the Russian Orthodox Church had to suspend contacts with the Episcopal Church in the USA due to the fact that it consecrated an open homosexual as a bishop.

At the same time, the Russian Orthodox Church has remained open to contacts with the North American confessions which have stayed faithful to the traditions of our dialogue and which are firmly committed to biblical morality, in particular, with the Anglican Church of North America, as it has separated itself from the Episcopal Church because of the above-mentioned incident.

The theme of morality may become one of the most important in our cooperation. In today's pluralistic world, the processes of liberalization have swept over some Christian communities. Many churches have diverted from biblical teaching too far in this respect, even if this attitude is not endorsed by the majority of these communities' members.

The Russian Orthodox Church consistently states that for her any double standards with regard to Christian ethics or any experiments with the ethical component of our faith are unacceptable.

The so-called 'liberal theology' clearly conflicts with the apostolic heritage. First of all, it concerns the introduction of the practice of prayer for so-called 'same-sex couples', even if such a prayer is not formally equated with the celebration of marriage, which in the Church's view can be concluded only between a man and a woman.

Liberal Christians have often maintained that society needs to preserve stability. However, what stability can be preserved by 'blessing' a sin? The Church has always been called to proclaim the truth of Christ and condemn sin, even in defiance of the demands of the society and 'the powers that be'.

Did Christ try to adapt His message to the standards of this world? Did He promise the apostles stability and comfort? Did he promise them that their preaching would be a success? Let us listen to what He says to the apostles, when he sends them out to preach: 'I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves. But beware of men: for they will deliver you up to the councils, and they will scourge you in their synagogues; And ye shall be brought before governors and kings for my sake, for a testimony against them and the Gentiles. But when they deliver you up, take no thought how or what ye shall speak: for it shall be given you in that same hour what ye shall speak. For it is not ye that speak, but the Spirit of your Father which speaketh in you. And the brother shall deliver up the brother to death, and the father the child: and the children shall rise up against their parents, and cause them to be put to death. And ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake: but he that endureth to the end shall be saved'. (Mt. 10:16-22)

How little does this resemble the discourse of today's liberal Christians who seek to adapt the Church to the standards of this world, to make it tolerant, not towards people, not towards sinners, but towards sin. Sin is elevated to the dignity of a norm and to this end even the words of Jesus and His apostles are rewritten and re-interpreted.

We do not at all insist that the Church should refuse to help sinners. Christians are obliged to pray for all sinners and to wish them salvation. The Church should treat any individual with pastoral responsibility regardless of his or her sexual orientation. But the Church cannot bless a vice. She cannot reform the norm of faith as sealed in the holy Gospel and the letters of the apostles.

Another important problem, which needs a consolidated Christian witness, is the legalization of abortion. Today, we see an increasing number of pretexts offered to justify the killing of babies in the mother's womb. The motivation varies, but it all lies on the practical plane and considers the needs of potential parents alone, ignoring the right of a child to be born. To struggle with this evil, churches should testify for all to hear that abortion is killing, that a human life has value since the moment of its conception to the moment of its natural death. It is necessary to maintain more active cooperation with the legislature to avoid the adoption of such laws. It is extremely important to carry out educational work by explaining

to young couples elementary notions of the responsibility of spouses for their marital union.

This problem lies in the context of a broader problem of the correlation between human rights and a person's responsibility for his or her actions before his neighbours and the whole of society. Today a special accent is placed on the rights and freedoms of the individual, without taking into account the interests of society. Priority is given to various minorities, which often behave very aggressively and defiantly towards the absolute majority.

In our day numerous gay parades have swept over European cities. We are dealing not merely with the propaganda of non-traditional sexual orientation. We are rather dealing with its proud demonstration, its showing off and imposition on society. The states that seek to enter the European Union are required today to hold gay parades as a permit for obtaining the status of candidate. What kind of society do we live in? What kind of society will we leave to our posterity?

Today we, Christians of various confessions, should unite around the very simple common human values which are subjected to mockery and profanation against the background of wild manifestation of all kinds of 'non-traditional' models of behaviour: to defend marriage as union of a man and a woman, to defend the right of a child to be born, to defend the right of the aged to die a natural death rather than from a lethal injection administered by a doctor, to defend the right of doctors to refuse to administer abortion or euthanasia for moral considerations.

The sphere of morality is a wide field for common action for the Christian confessions which remain committed to the teaching of Christ expressed in Holy Scripture. Our common pastoral task is to advocate the Christian identity of man.

I am aware of the long and intensive discussion held on these issues in the Protestant milieu in the United States. A considerable number of American Christians and quite a number of churches firmly adhere to biblical morality. The Moscow Patriarchate is prepared for broad cooperation with these communities.

Certainly, we have a great deal of other points of contact as well. These include the protection of the needy and disabled, aid to the sick, especially those suffering from such diseases as AIDS and various forms of cancer, concern for peace and justice, and joint diakonia service.

Among the priorities for inter-Christian cooperation at the present stage is the need for common concern for the brothers who are in distress in various parts of the world. First of all, it is the question of

consequences of the so-called 'Arab Spring', which has led to the real genocide of Christians in the Middle East and North Africa.

Today, there are almost no Christians left in Libya. The Christian community in Iraq has decreased in number many times. A terrible tragedy is suffered by our brothers in faith in Syria. The Coptic community in Egypt has decreased in number. The very survival of Christianity is threatened in quite a number of countries in the Middle East – the cradle of Christianity.

This issue has become ever more urgent in the light of the tragic events accompanying the intensified activity of the 'Islamic State' terrorist grouping, which is threatening now not only countries in the Middle East but also the whole civilized world. Broken loose is the monstrous power of hatred towards people and terror have broken loose and must be stopped. At the same time, we should not forget that this process was not originally spontaneous. Its growth has been stimulated by a policy that some countries of the West have pursued in recent years in the Middle East region, as well as concrete measures for financing and arming Islamic militants under the guise of 'fighters for freedom and democratic transformations'.

The credibility of Christian witness to the tragedy in the Middle East should consist in telling the truth about it, not repeating trite clichés spread around by the mass media. The voice of churches should be independent from that of leading world powers and rise above the political game-playing. It is a witness that requires the Gospel's wisdom and courage.

To reach out to the world public, the Moscow Patriarchate seeks to use diverse platforms. The problem of persecution against Christians is always present on the agenda of our Church's leaders when they meet with representatives of the world establishment. The Russian Orthodox Church has repeatedly made statements in defence of the Middle East Christians. Quite recently, His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia sent a letter to Iraqi President Fuad Masum, expressing concern for the situation of Christians in the north of that country and a message to Pakistan's President Mamnoon Hussein asking him to pardon the Christian woman Asia Bibi who was sentenced to death on false charges.

The Russian Orthodox Church's actions in the diplomatic field are combined with practical aid to Christians in the Middle East. Our churches have repeatedly raised funds in aid to our suffering brothers and sisters in Syria. Together with the Palestinian Society we organized eleven flights with humanitarian aid, which is distributed to both Christians and Muslims in Syria.

Considerable attention is given to our direct contacts with representatives of Churches in the Middle East. Thus, as far back as the very beginning of the 'Arab Spring', the Primate of the Russian Orthodox

Church visited Syria and Lebanon. He met with the supreme political leaders of those countries and religious leaders in the region. In the same period, His Holiness Patriarch Kirill made visits to Turkey, Egypt, Israel, Palestine and Jordan.

This year, official visits to Moscow were made by His Beatitude Patriarch John X of Antioch, Patriarch Theodore II of the Coptic Church, Patriarch-Catholicos Mar Dinkha IV of the Assyrian Church. Last year official visit to Moscow was made by head of the Maronite Church, Bechara Boutros Cardinal al-Rahi. They told us about the tragedy that their flock experiences every day in the Middle East.

This problem has several aspects which need the efforts of the world community.

First, it is necessary to support those who have had to emigrate to Europe, America or neighboring countries in the Middle East, such as Jordan and Lebanon.

Secondly, the whole of Christendom needs to urgently join the task of giving aid to the refugees who have found themselves today in the Iraqi mountains or in the Syrian Desert, and who have found themselves to be on the brink of starvation, almost without food, water and medicines.

The third task, which is difficult but is the most important one, is to work out a set of measures for preserving the Christian presence in the Middle East. It is necessary to move to the fore the problem of preserving religious monuments and holy places where they are subjected to desecration today. Among the indispensable points of a program for normalizing the situation in the Middle East should be the creation of conditions for refugees to return to their native cities and villages.

A few years ago, the world entered an era of international tension. Its hotbeds are found not only in the Middle East but also in Europe.

The conflict in Ukraine has caused a serious crisis in relations between the West and Russia which have started of talking to each other in the language of sanctions. The world has again found itself in a situation similar to the Cold War. The tension is inflamed by an information campaign actively waged in the mass media. We appreciate the attitude of those churches which are able to give a sober assessment to the developments and which refrain from one-sided political statements.

For the Russian Orthodox Church, what is happening now to the fraternal Ukrainian people is a deep tragedy. The terrible months of continued discord have been marked with many hundreds of victims – dead, wounded, missing, subjected to various forms of discrimination and persecution, roofless and deprived of livelihood.

The whole world was shocked by the bloody tragedies in Odessa and Mariupol, an objected investigation of which has yet to be carried out. So far, publicity has not been given to the causes of the crash of the Malaysian Boeing over Donetsk, which took scores of lives. There are the terrible facts of the discovery of several mass burial places of civilians who had been shot to death in the Donetsk Region. Who is standing behind of all these crimes? All these facts should be thoroughly investigated and made public.

The Russian Orthodox Church has endlessly called upon the conflicting sides to cease hostilities, to renounce the pointless language of sanctions and ultimatums and to search for real ways of solving the problems accumulated during the confrontation.

We are utterly disturbed by the situation of our flock in eastern Ukraine. In the course of hostilities and artillery shelling, several of our priests were killed and many wounded. There were cases where shells hit churches during divine services, killing and wounding parishioners. Some fifty churches were either damaged or fully destroyed by shelling. There are cases of vandalism and the burning of Orthodox churches; leaflets and posters are spread to inflame inter-confessional and inter-ethnic strife.

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church, a part of the Moscow Patriarchate which enjoys the right of self-government, is the largest religious organization in Ukraine. Her flock consists of people standing on either side of the confrontation. Unlike other Ukrainian confessions, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church does not support any of the sides and remains alien to political engagement. It is for this reason that she is continuously attacked by nationalistic forces.

We believe that Christian Churches, unlike politicians, should never squander their peacemaking potential. We have at our disposal special means which overcome boundaries, both geographical and ideological. We must work together to resolve today's conflicts also for the reconciliation of the Ukrainian people and the prevention of the bloodshed in the south-east of the country from escalating.

Among the most acute problems today is an enormous number of refugees from eastern Ukraine. Over a million of refugees from the heavily-shelled eastern Ukraine are in Russia today. The Russian Orthodox Church has given all possible aid to these people standing in need of vital essentials.

We are ready to cooperate in this area with American Christians and for joint work under international humanitarian projects for restoring fully or partly destroyed cities and villages in eastern Ukraine, which are experiencing a genuine humanitarian disaster.

I hope that the present Forum will open a new page in the history of relations between the Christian Churches in Russia and in the USA, which will be aimed at consolidating our common witness to the

Gospel's eternal values and to resolving the many humanitarian problems facing the modern civilization.

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