Greeting address by Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk to the Third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Catholic Bishops on Pastoral Challenges to the Family in the Context of Evangelization

Your Holiness,

Your Beatitudes,

Your Eminences and Your Excellencies:

Allow me first of all to greet you on behalf of the primate of the Russian Orthodox Church, His Holiness Kirill, Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia.

The topic of the family is one of the most acute and vital today. It is an indicator of the moral state of the society in which we live.

We have anxiously watched as abuse of the notions of freedom and tolerance has been used in recent years to dismantle the basic values rooted in religious traditions. There is an increasingly aggressive propagation of the idea of moral relativism applied also to the institution of the family held sacred by all of humanity.

In quite a number of countries in Europe and America, despite numerous protests, same-sex unions are approved and recognized on the level of the state. In some places, the right of same-sex partners to adopt children has already been fixed legally and implemented, including through the use of “surrogate motherhood” technology.

At the same time, traditional families built on the notion of marriage as union of man and woman become weaker and weaker. Instead of concern for their consolidation, there is the propaganda of so-called “free relations”. The notions of fidelity, mutual respect and responsibility of spouses are replaced by the imposition of hedonism and calls to live for one’s own self.

Children are no longer seen as the desirable fruit of spouses’ mutual love. The right of abortion,

restricted by almost nothing, has become widespread, and has led to the legalization of the destruction of millions of lives. Among the serious problems is the existence of orphans whose parents are still alive, and abandoned and lonely disabled children.

The ideas of moral relativism have also affected many Christians who in words confess the Church's teaching on the family but in deed refuse to follow it.

Asserting the sanctity of marriage based on the words of the Saviour Himself (see Mt. 19:6, Mk. 10:9), the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church traditionally place personal responsibility above egotistical interests. To cultivate in a Christian this responsibility before the family, society and the surrounding world is the most important tasks for Churches today. The protection of human dignity and affirmation of the lofty value of love realized in the family is an integral component of the Gospel message that we are called to bring to people.

In November 2013, the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate and the Pontifical Council for the Family led by Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia held in Rome a conference on 'Orthodox and Catholics Protecting the Family Together'. In the final statement, we underlined “our conviction that we bear a common responsibility for making marriage and family life the way to sanctity for Christian families”.

The time has come for Christians to join efforts and come out as a united front for the noble goal of protecting the family when confronted by the challenges of the secular world for the sake of preserving the future of civilization. It is the field in which our alliance may become really needed.

We should together defend our positions both in dialogue with the legislative and executive authorities in particular countries and on the platforms of international organizations, such as the UN and the Council of Europe. We already have a certain experience of such cooperation; it is enough to recall the well-known case of *Lautsi versus Italy*.

It is essential not to confine ourselves to noble appeals, but to press in every possible way for the legal protection of the family. It is necessary to restore in our society the awareness that freedom is unthinkable without responsibility for one’s actions.

The Orthodox Church consistently proclaims the ideal of the one and only marital union concluded once and for all. At the same time, conceding the weakness of human nature, in exceptional cases the Orthodox Church allows for a new church marriage in the instance of the breakup of the first marriage. In this our Church follows the principle of *oikonomia*, guided as she is by the love of the sinner who is not to be deprived of the means of salvation. In today’s world, in which the strict observance of the

church ordinances becomes increasingly rare, the practice of *oikonomia*, which has existed in Orthodoxy throughout the centuries, may become a valuable experience in settling the pastoral problems of the family.

The Orthodox Church has accumulated a rich experience of pastoral care for the family. She has always preserved the institution of married clergy. As a rule, the families of priests are large and their children are brought up in the spirit of Christian devotion and faithfulness to church teaching. A priest with his own experience of family relations and parenting can better understand family problems and give his spiritual children the necessary pastoral aid. I believe it would be useful to notice this experience, which is also present in the Catholic Churches of the Eastern Rite.

Speaking about the Churches of the Eastern Rite, I would like to digress from the forum's topics and to touch upon an issue that has become today a stumbling block in the relations between the Orthodox and the Catholic Churches. It is the problem of Uniatism which has become once again more acute as a result of the recent events in Ukraine. Regrettably, the conflict in that country, which has already taken the lives of thousands, from the very beginning has acquired a religious dimension.

A significant role in its conception and development has been played by the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church. From the very first days of the conflict, the Greek Catholics identified with one of the sides of the confrontation. Contrary to the respect for canonical norms prevailing in relations between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, the Greek Catholics have entered into active cooperation with the Orthodox schismatic groups.

The Joint Commission for Orthodox-Catholic Dialogue, as far back as 1993 in Balamand, recognized that Uniatism is not the way to unity. We are grateful to our Catholic brothers for their open recognition of the mistakenness of Uniatism. And we have to state regrettably again that Uniatism does not bring the Orthodox and the Catholics any closer to each other; on the contrary, it divides us.

On behalf of the Russian Orthodox Church, I would like to address the representatives of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church present in this hall with an appeal to renounce any statements on political topics and any visible forms of support of the schism as well as calls to create "one Local Church of Ukraine". For standing behind this call is a simple truth, the wish to tear away the Orthodox faithful in Ukraine from their Mother Church, the Moscow Patriarchate, with which Ukraine has been bound by age-old blood ties.

The principal mission of the Church is to serve the cause of people's salvation. The mandate given to us by God does not presuppose interference in political and civil conflicts. In a world in which there are so many divisions, in which the very foundations of the survival of human civilization, including the

institution of the family, are under threat, Christians are called to be “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world” (Mt. 5:13-14), bringing all to the love of each other and to unity in Christ.

We can do much together, also for the protection of the Christians who have become today victims of persecution. In Iraq and Syria and in a number of other countries in the Middle East and Africa, Christians are subjected to genocide. We should do all that depends on us to stop the killing of Christians, to stop their mass exodus from the places where they have lived for centuries, to draw the attention of the whole world community to their calamitous state.

I wish you all, dear brothers, God’s blessing and success in your efforts!

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