



Metropolitan Hilarion meets with Maronite Patriarch Béchara

On 27 February 2013, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations (DECR), met with His Beatitude Béchara Boutros Cardinal al-Raï, Maronite Patriarch of Antioch and All the East, who arrived in Moscow on an official visit at the invitation of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia. They were joined at the meeting, which took place at the DECR premises, by Archbishop Boulos Nabil El- Sayah, vicar general; Mr. Walid Ghayad, press officer; Mar. Amal Abi Zeid, executive director of the Maronite Foundation in the World; and Archbishop Nifon of Philippopolis, representative of the Orthodox Church of Antioch in Moscow.

The DECR was represented at the meeting by hegumen Philaret (Bulekov), vice-chairman; archpriest Dimitry Sizonenko, secretary for inter-Christian relations; archpriest Sergiy Zvonarev, secretary for far abroad countries; and deacon Alexiy Dikarev, a staff member of the secretariat for inter-Christian relations.

Metropolitan Hilarion cordially greeted Patriarch Béchara, who visit Russia and the Russian Church for the first time, and noted the importance of his visit for the development of bilateral relations between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Maronite Patriarchate, especially in the difficult time Christians in the Middle East are living in. Christian population in the region is rapidly diminishing due to the military conflicts in Iraq and Syria. There is a danger of the same situation developing in Lebanon. However, the experience of peaceful coexistence of representatives of Christians Churches and the Sunnite and Shiite communities has been accumulated there and must be preserved. A special role in the balance of forces belongs by right to the Maronite Church to which the majority of Christians in Lebanon belongs.

Metropolitan Hilarion underscored that the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian government authorities worry about the situation of Christians in the Middle East, come forward for the peaceful resolution of conflict in Syria and provide humanitarian aid to Christian population. He assured the high guests in the willingness of the Russian Orthodox to do anything possible for keeping Christian presence in the region.

Patriarch Béchara highly appreciated the efforts exerted by the Russian Church and Russia for ensuring peace in the Middle East and noted a great contribution of the Russian state to cultural and humanitarian development of Lebanon in the past and at present. He named political, economic and

social reasons for leaving the country by Christians who are not certain in their future. These are the Arab-Israeli conflicts and confrontation between the Sunnites and the Shiites. Regrettably, Christians are the first to suffer from these conflicts. Also, radical forces aspiring to use spontaneous movements of people in the Arab countries present a danger.

The sides agreed that world community does not do enough to stop the lingering religious and ethnic enmity in the Middle East and underscored the increasing role of inter-church cooperation in creating necessary conditions for peaceful life of Christians in the region, which is a cradle of Christianity. Mutual interest was expressed in continuing consultations on these issues.

Earlier that day, the Maronite Patriarch took part in a solemn ceremony of presenting a particle of relics of St. Maron the Hermit to the Moscow church dedicated to the saint. The Russian Church commemorates him on February 27. Archbishop Arseniy of Istra, who officiated at the Divine Liturgy, gratefully received the shrine from the Primate of the Maronite Church. Attending the ceremony also was Archbishop Ivan Jurkovič, apostolic nuncio in the Russian Federation, who took an active part in bringing the relic from the Italian town of Foligno.

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