“Opposition to Discrimination against Christians in the World as a Contribution to the Development of the Concept of Human Rights”

Address of Metropolitan Hilarion, chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate’s Department for External Church Relations, at the session of the United Nations Third Committee (New York, 23 October 2012).

Mr. Chair:

I take the floor at this session as a representative of the Russian Orthodox Church numbering many millions of faithful in different countries.

A major task of international institutions, among which the UN plays a leading role, is the protection of human rights in various regions of the world. Freedom of religion is a fundamental human right. Our Church has always spoken out against any form of discrimination, persecution and violence on religious grounds.

Today we are witnessing numerous violations of religious freedom and manifestations of violence against representatives of different religious communities and whole ethno-religious groups. I would like to pay special attention to the problem of the discrimination and persecution of Christians, currently the most persecuted religious group on the planet. Every five minutes a Christian is killed for his faith: this data was provided by the OSCE representative, Dr. Massimo Intovigne. Over one hundred million Christians are being persecuted nowadays, as human rights organization Open Doors reports. These figures must compel the international community not only to think about and to discuss the problem of discrimination against Christians, but also to take decisive steps for their defence.

The Middle East and some countries of Asia and Africa are undergoing dramatic processes caused by revolutions, armed conflicts, political confrontations, and conflicts of economic interests. Deep social transformations in these countries are leading to the upset of the inter-religious balance established centuries ago, which allowed different confessional communities and representatives of religious majorities and minorities to coexist peacefully with one another. The radicalization of a part of the religious majority takes place, bringing about changes in social climate especially when the radical forces take control over the government and receive an opportunity to change the laws.

These processes result in the rapid deterioration of the situation of religious minorities, in the first place

Christians, in the countries where they have lived for many centuries and which they regard as their homeland.

Our Church traditionally maintains close relations with the ancient Christian Churches of the Middle East. Hierarchs of these Churches and simple faithful regularly inform us of various outrageous facts of discrimination and violence against Christians.

My duty as a representative of the Moscow Patriarchate is to raise my voice at this distinguished assembly in defense of my Christian brothers.

In several public statements and addresses, our Church expressed her concern about the drastic deterioration of the situation of Christians in different regions of the world. Later last year we convened an International Conference on Freedom of Faith: the Problem of Discrimination and Persecution against Christians. Next year we are planning to organize an international forum on the topic or inter-religious cooperation with the participation of authoritative religious leaders.

The picture of the present discrimination against Christians is depressing. I will give you some concrete examples.

Last year, Christians made up ten percent of the population of Syria. Today in this country, affected by civil war, tens of thousands of Christians have fallen victim to religious intolerance. Their churches and shrines are being destroyed, they are leaving cities and villages where they lived for centuries, their homes are ruined or captured by the radically-minded representatives of the dominant religion. No less than fifty thousand Christians have had to flee from the Syrian city of Homs.

The distinguished representative of Egypt stated a few minutes ago "that the Arab countries respect freedom of expression. One that in not used to incite hatred agains anyone. One that in not directed towards one specific religion or culture. A freedom of expression that tackles extremism and violence". We see, however, that Egypt, with a total population of eighty million people and with a Christian population of about eight million, is facing mass exodus of Coptic Christians because of the systematic persecutions on religious grounds. We call on the Egyptian government to make every effort to stop this persecution and to protect christians from harted and violence.

Over half of the sixty thousand Christians have left Libya during the civil war.

More than one and a half million Christians lived in Iraq until 2003. Nowadays, just one tenth of the Christian population still lives there, the rest were either killed or had to emigrate. In Pakistan, Sudan and Algeria, Christians are deprived of legal protection from violence and are persecuted in accordance

to the local laws.

In Pakistan, Christians are subjected to the most severe reprisals and suffer subtle humiliation. It happens due to the inaction of the authorities, that is the impunity of the criminals. The list of the most notorious cases of violence in Pakistan against children and teenagers from Christian families was published last August. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan reports about the increase of cases of the abduction of young girls to force their conversion to Islam. 1,800 such cases were registered last year. In recent months a wave of anti-Christian attacks swept along the country.

Thousands of Christians have been fleeing Mali for Algeria and Mauritania where they find refuge from the radical Islamists who have intensified their activity in the north of the country, while “Boko Haram,” a radical Islamist sect continues to exterminate Christians in Nigeria.

Today we often hear an opinion that persecuted Christians need conditions for free emigration to third countries. Certainly, these conditions are necessary as an extreme measure to be taken when there are no other ways for saving human lives. Yet, such efforts suit those who persecute the dissidents, as their goal is to oust Christians from the country and force them to emigrate.

First and foremost, efforts should be made for making the life of Christians safe in places where they used to live for centuries on the land of their predecessors. The most meaningful and effective could be efforts made by authoritative international institutions.

I would like to draw your attention to the timely introduction of the term “Christianophobia” in the vocabulary of the international, including the human rights defence, community at the UN World Conference against Racism in 2009. Representatives of our Church insisted on the introduction of this term into international usage, and in the light of the current processes its usage is more than justified, though the term itself only partly reflects the humanitarian tragedy which is unfolding before the eyes of the whole world. This tragedy should be called the persecution of Christians rather than Christianophobia. It would be a more correct name as in recent years persecutions have become more systematic and widespread.

We believe that within the present international mechanisms of protection of the religious minorities it is necessary to establish permanent effective centers for collecting and studying the data on discrimination on religious grounds in different regions and countries of the world, including the persecution of individual Christians and Christian communities.

This information should attract the closest attention of the authoritative international institutions and of the UN in the first place. Concrete data on the violation of the rights of Christians and on the different

forms of violence against them allow to introduce a proper item on the agenda of dialogue maintained by the UN envoys and other influential international structures with the governments of the countries in which the manifestations of hatred towards Christians occur and increase.

Any case of violence against believers and persecution of the believers, and of religious minorities in the first place, should become a subject of trial both at the national and international courts.

Statements and actions of the international institutions are an important instrument of the international community's acting against the violations of religious freedom, which is a fundamental human right.

In January 2011 the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) adopted the Resolution "On the Situation of Christians in the Context of Freedom of Religion," condemning the killing and discrimination against Christians in several countries, in particular in Egypt, Nigeria, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq and the Philippines. The Resolution contains a proposal to develop a permanent capacity to monitor the situation of restrictions on religious freedom. The gist of the proposed mechanism is that economic aid and political support are extended to the countries in which the persecution of religious minorities takes place only in exchange for the guarantees of security for them.

A similar resolution was adopted by the European Parliament, while the PACE Political Affairs Committee, at its meeting in Paris on 15 November 2011, adopted a statement in connection with the acts of violence against Christians in Egypt.

Yet, in the current year, when the number of the facts of persecutions against Christians has increased considerably, we have not seen an adequate reaction of the international structures. Regrettably, this topic does not occupy a proper place on the UN agenda.

We are convinced that all states are called to ensure the possibility for their citizens to freely profess their religion, to bring their children up in their faith and openly express and defend their position in the public sphere without being persecuted.

To prevent negative trends in the sphere of observing the freedom of religion and defending the right of every person to belong to any religious community, common efforts and actions of solidarity of all international structures, public organizations and religious communities, and of all people of good will are needed.

May I express my hope that such an authoritative international institution as the United Nations will pay due attention to the problem of persecution of Christians in the modern world, will raise its voice in defence of the persecuted and help the world community to establish an effective mechanism to oppose

discrimination on religious grounds.

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