Metropolitan Hilarion: For radical Muslims any Christian is an enemy

Reports are coming every day about the persecution of Christians in various countries. The center of tension is situated in the Middle East and northern Africa where the wave of 'Arab revolutions' has brought the consolidation of radical Islamic movements. The causes of the persecution and the reaction of the Russian Orthodox Church to it are considered by Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, head of the Department for External Church Relations, in his interview to the Izvestiya daily:

Q. What are the causes of the recent increased persecution of Christians?

A. There are several causes. First, it is certainly the propagation of the ideology of radical Islam caused by ignorance. Radicals have used religious slogans for their own purposes which have nothing to do with religion. It is not accidental that representatives of traditional Islam have strongly condemned the actions of extremists and stated that they distort the teaching of the founder of the religion. Secondly, the right actions of authorities are needed to achieve inter-confessional peace.

When the political power is impaired or when radicals come to power, then hate and enmity come to replace peace. It happened so in Iraq where, with the help of an external force, the political regime was overthrown to give way to radical forces. And the situation of Christians has sharply worsened. While under Saddam Hussein there were 1,5 million of Christians in Iraq, now, according to various data, they are from 150 to 400 thousand. We see a sharp deterioration in the confessional relations in Egypt after the overthrow of Mubarak. I do not want to give any assessment to the overthrown political regimes now; I only state the obvious fact of sharp deterioration in the situation of Christians in these countries.

Q. How the importance of Christianity can be restored?

A. In the countries where Christians and Muslims live together, a system for control is needed. The state should undertake to create adequate conditions for people of all religions to confess their faith freely. And precisely the government is responsible for ensuring inter-confessional peace. The way in which

states achieve their goal depends on the concrete local situation. It also seems to me that when Western countries make a political decision concerning the situation in a particular country, they should necessarily take into account the fact that a change in the situation may lead to an aggravation in the situation of Christians. Regrettably, this factor is not considered now and our brothers in faith become hostages to the policy of ‘establishing democracy in countries of the Middle East and northern Africa’.

Q. Can problems in inter-confessional relations increase in Syria where, judging by the recent reports, Christians have already begun to be persecuted?

A. Until recently Syria has enjoyed an inter-confessional balance which has been built for centuries. When Patriarch Kirill, during his visit last November, met with leaders of Christian Churches in Syria and Lebanon, they expressed fears that if the political situation changed to lead radical Islamists to power, then the situation of Christians would worsen. And really, we can see that it is already happening in those parts of Syria where fundamentalists have gained the upper hand.

Q. Can you single out the Christian Church that has suffered the persecution the most?

A. Radical Muslims do not know much to subtilize things, as for them any Christian is an enemy. Terrorist actions are carried out against anybody – Orthodox Christians, Copts, Catholics, Protestants. But I would like to note that when a bomb is blown up, Muslims often become victims as well. Therefore, all world religions including Islam must come out against terrorism in a united front.

Q. We keep talking about the persecution of Christians by radical Islamists. But are there manifestations of intolerance by people of other religions?

A. They happen. For instance, in Jerusalem and other cities in the Holy Land, there are examples of hatred towards Christians on the part of radical Jews. We have also received reports about the persecution of Christians by Hindus in India and Pakistan.

Q. Is the Russian Orthodox Church undertaking any concrete actions now to support Christians around the world?

A. When Vladimir Putin yet running for presidency met with heads of traditional religions in Russia, I expressed the wish that the protection of Christian minorities in the countries where they are persecuted should become one of the major vectors in Russia's foreign policy, Putin assured me that it would be so. Now it is a major issue in the dialogue conducted by the Russian Orthodox Church with the Foreign Ministry. There is a working group for cooperation between the Church and the ministry. We meet twice a year. The latest meeting held after this Easter was devoted to Christianophobia and the persecution against Christians in various countries. There is also a system of more frequent meetings with diplomatic staff on current issues. Obviously, the Church and the state have their own agendas and not all the approaches are identical. But in this case we can and must act together.

Q. And what are the main thrusts of these actions?

A. First, we should prevent any suppression of the facts of persecution against Christians. Secondly, we can involve leaders of the countries under the canonical jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church in solving problems linked with the situation of Christians in the Middle East. Thirdly, leverage can be found in political and economic relations, just as the European Commission proposed it a year ago. The Middle East and other countries where Christian minorities are persecuted normally need political and economic support of strong Western states. And this support should be given only in exchange of guarantees for the rights of Christian minorities.

Q. Have these issues been discussed at meetings with leaders of the Middle East countries?

A. Yes, they have. It is too early though to speak of the results as the situation there is very tense. Still we hope that through joint efforts we will manage to build a Christian protection system.

Q. Does the Russian Orthodox Church cooperate with other Christian confessions in dealing with these issues?

A. Of course. It seems to me that the problem of the protection of Christians should be placed in the forefront of relations between Christian Churches. Of course, the protection of Christians should become

the primary problem to be discussed in interreligious dialogue. Sometimes we discuss theological issues. Though important, they have no direct bearing on people's everyday life. But we should give more attention to the protection of people, their life and their right to confess Christian faith.

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