Address by Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, Head of the DECR, to the 50th International Eucharistic Congress

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To the 50th International Eucharistic Congress

The Eucharist: Communion with Christ and with one another

11 June 2012, Dublin

Your Eminences and Graces,

Dear Fathers, Brothers and Sisters:

I would like to thank the organizing committee of the 50th jubilee Eucharistic Congress and personally Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin for the invitation and opportunity to attend and address this authoritative Christian forum.

These days we will speak about the Eucharist as the most important and fundamental sacrament of the Church and about our communion with Christ as it is actualized in this world. I would like to share with you some thoughts and experiences characteristic of the Eastern Christian, Orthodox Eucharistic devotion and theology. At the same time, it should be noted that it is theology that directly determines our assessment of today's reality and its problems and challenges, which I would like to mention in my remarks as well.

In the Early Church, as you know, baptism as admission of new members to the Church was accomplished during the Divine Liturgy. It is thus asserted that the sacraments of the Church are of the Eucharistic nature and their administration is a conciliar task of a Christian community for which everything is λειτουγία, that is, a common work to be done by all its members, not only the clergy.

The Eucharist completes and symbolizes the fullness of initiation of newly-baptized members to the Church. It is extremely significant that in early Christian times Baptism was celebrated mostly during the Great Saturday service anticipating the Easter liturgy. Newly-baptized people clad in white clothes would march in a procession with the cross from the baptismal font to the church, accompanied by the singing of the hymn *All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ* (Gal. 3:27) to take part for the first time in the Eucharist and to partake of the Holy Gifts of Christ. It was not accidental that new members of the Church were admitted to the fullness of the Eucharistic communion on the Easter Day because on the day when the whole creation is renewed the whole Church is renewed as well. *Ecclesia*, the Church is essentially the power of resurrection and the mystery of the Risen One Who makes us participants in eternal life. It is not without reason that St John Chrysostom and many other Christian authors liken the emergence of the Church to the birth of Eve. The Church of Christ, the Body and Bride of New Adam, is born from the Saviour's pierced side coming out from which are water and blood (Jn. 19:34) – the water of Baptism and the blood of the Eucharist, giving life and uniting members of the Church with one another. Truly, the unity with Christ in the Eucharist is something more that an encounter with Him in a prayer, for through it the essential fellowship (*communion, κοινωνία*) takes place with the Heavenly Head of the Church, and our mortal bodies become His members, our thoughts and feelings His thoughts and feelings, and all our life in all its dimensions becomes filled with divine life transformed 'by the power and work and inspiration of the Holy Spirit'.

'Theology should be drunk from the bottom of the Eucharistic Cup', said Russian theologian Archpriest Sergiy Bulgakov. It means that in the sacrament of Holy Communion, this source of communion with God accessible to every Christian believer, there is the source and foundation of not only the doing of theology but also its ultimate form – divine thinking, which, contrary to a popular opinion, is accessible not only for zealots and ascetics but also for all the faithful. Thus the Eucharist for us is not only the door to the Heavenly Kingdom but also the ladder by which the Kingdom of God comes to us *with power* (Mk. 9:1). It transforms our temporal nature and changes our hearts directing them to the upper world.

The Anaphora of St. Basil the Great contains these words: *Unite all of us who partake of this one bread and cup to one another in the communion of the one Holy Spirit.* How often in our everyday life do we underestimate the significance of these words, reducing the Eucharist, the sacrament of the Heavenly Kingdom, to a means of gaining 'personal grace'! Indeed, it is in the Eucharist that the Church of God reveals herself as a living community, a community of the faithful united under the One Head – Christ. And while worshipping during the liturgy among people unknown to us, they do not at all become strangers to us. On the contrary, even if we are not acquainted with them personally, we are united with them in the One Body of Christ, which is the Church of God.

As the pillars of Orthodox Eucharistic theology of the 20th century, Fathers Sergiy Bulgakov, Nikolay Afanasyev, Alexander Schmemann and John Meyendorff, repeatedly insisted, it is necessary to

discover again and again the original ecclesial dimension of the sacrament of Thanksgiving without belittling the fullness of its grace-giving impact on every participant personally. The individual aspect of the Eucharist, however, by no means should overshadow the communal nature and the self-building of the Church in this 'Sacrament of the Sacraments'. As the Eucharist is unthinkable without the participation of the church community, the canonical rules of the Orthodox Church do not allow a bishop or a priest to celebrate the liturgy alone, if there are no other worshippers around. This underscores that the Eucharist is not a means of individual sanctification above all, but the sacrament of the Church in which the Holy Spirit unites all the faithful 'to one another' in the one Body of Christ.

With the quantitative growth of the Church, baptism gradually began to be reduced to a requested private service, a development in church life described in the West as *casualia*. Certainly, it did not made a beneficial impact on the self-awareness of Christians. The 20th century Russian theologians saw the causes of a general crisis suffered by European Christianity and religious awareness as such in a change that happened in the Christian perception of church sacraments and the very nature of the Church. Under the influence of rationalism, sacraments gradually ceased to be understood as fullness of the whole and began to be treated as a private affair. In this paradigm, the attitude to God became consumerist while religion began to be seen as a means of solving personal needs and problems. This approach based on the rudiments of primitive religious thinking led to indifference to Christ's saving sacrifice, to the being of the Church revealing herself in the Eucharist and acquiring new members for herself in the sacrament of Baptism.

We have all reasons to be concerned for the fact that today's world is moving away from Christ and that Europe is gradually abandoning her Christian roots. Undoubtedly, this destructive process is accompanied with a great deal of other negative social factors, such as extreme individualism, consumerism and self-indulgence, atomization of society, hostile attitude to traditional values. But we should not think that these processes are developing by themselves and that we as Christians are not responsible for them. On the contrary, all this is a consequence of the cooling of our faith. The weakening of living faith led to shifts in social awareness, to what Heidegger described as 'reduction of God to the notion of value'. God for Europeans ceased to be the living and loving Father. For this reason, the new time thinkers first reduced Him to an intelligible object, *Raison d'être*, an ethical feeling, a categorical imperative, that is, characteristics still having a certain positive meaning, which eventually brought them to the full negation expressed in the concept of 'the death of God'. In the language of the modern man, the word 'god' can designate anything, even the inner psychological essence of the human being. Consequently, 'the death of God' period was replaced by one of instrumentalization, obscure pseudo-theological concepts called to gratify 'people's individual needs'. Having 'killed' God, the civilization, which rejected Him, made an attempt to 'reanimate' Him but in a fundamentally new form. To assert the dominant cult of consumerism and self-indulgence, it needs an impersonal and morally indifferent god devoid of any relation to the biblical Revelation. The new worldview is directed to

the disintegration of society in which there will be nothing to tie individual together and in which any attempt to revive traditional forms of social community will be under suspicion. The phantom of the new religious awareness has become today an object of market exploitation. However, this new form of religiosity will never be able to become a true religion since it is devoid of positive content – the creative principle which distinguishes any true religion from surrogates.

The new consumerist religiosity is quite consonant with the laws of market demand. It is morally neutral. If we look at the reality around us we will see this type of religiosity offered everywhere, something even penetrating into Christianity, thus destroying age-old traditions and deforming the dogmatic and moral teaching under the cover of concern for the human being.

Encountering such challenges and threats, we as Christians should first of all admit our share of guilt for the situation. It is not hopeless, but we need to have spiritual power and determination to oppose any further degradation of the European culture. Precisely the culture that has grown on the Christian soil has become today a battle-field against the forces who seek to eradicate all the positive things that Christianity has brought to the world. They do it to pave the way for the opportunity to manipulate the mass consciousness in their pursuit of power, influence and super-profit. Social phenomena devoid of inner positive content are doomed to self-destruction in the process of inner implosion. What is based on traditional morality lives forever. Precisely for this reason, Christianity in its time conquered the whole oikoumene without arms and showed vitality as compared to the heathen pseudo-morals devoid of creative impulse. This happened through the efforts of thousands of people of faith ready to sacrifice themselves for the ideas they preached. There is hardly anyone who will agree to sacrifice themselves for the sake of universal consumerism empty inside and closed in itself and attractive only from outside.

Baptism and the Eucharist in their interrelation make it possible for us to come to a deeper understanding of the conciliarity of the Church, to feel the authentic meaning of the social community based not on partiality but on charitable service for our neighbours who find themselves in need. In the Eucharist, Christians find the identity of the people of God reconciled with the God of humanity: *You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession…*, *Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy* (1 Pet. 2:9-10).

In this we find a source of tremendous power capable of opposing the degradation of the individual and society brought about by ‘this world’. Today it is culture that becomes a battle-field of destructive and creative principles. And the words of St. Paul: *We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places* (Eph. 6:12) become especially relevant in this context. In opposition to the work of the meonic powers of ‘rulers of this age’, Sartre’s Nothingness (*Néant*), we are given a

weapon different in nature and power, which is the creative positive impulse we draw from the sacrament of the Eucharist and from the life *to the full* (Jn. 10:10) given by Risen Christ to the world.

The Church has been sent to the world by our Saviour and she cannot dissociate herself from her apostolic mission or to become like a salt which has lost its saltiness (Lk. 14:34). The decay of Europe – isn't it come because Christians have lost the salt, that is, the positive creative impulse which used to build European culture for centuries? The modern culture devoid of this powerful and effective filling, which used to feed it for centuries, is becoming a self-sufficient closed system doomed to stagnation in the process of spiritual entropy. Meanwhile, culture cannot be self-sufficient since it is a product of the work of the human spirit which can die down. It is something against which the Word of God has warned us, saying, *Do not quench the Spirit* (1 Thes. 5:19).

Today as before we hear the admonition of St. Paul, saying, *Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person* (Col. 4:6). Divine life Christ gives us in the sacrament of Thanksgiving is precisely this salt. The taste of this salt makes Christians different from 'the sons of this age', the new creation different from the old creature who, resisting, tries to prevent all that is new. Our struggle is against the energies of non-existence, death and hell, which have been conquered by our Divine Teacher by His descent to the hell of the earth. As St. John Chrysostom says in his catechetical Paschal Sermon, *Hell was embittered, for it was overthrown. It was embittered, for it was fettered in chains. It took a body, and met God face to face. It took earth, and encountered Heaven. It took that which was seen, and fell upon the unseen!*

Devil and hell are already defeated by Christ. His victory is our heritage: *And this is the victory that has overcome the world— our faith* (1 Jn. 5:4). May our faith in the Lord Jesus Who rose from the dead and who has granted us eternal life which we partake of in Baptism and receive in full in the Eucharist become for us the victory over the powers of hell and death whose time has come, for 'life reigns!'

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