Press conference on teaching religion in secular school takes place at the Department for External Church Relations

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Press conference on “Teaching Religion in the Secular School. Experience of Lithuania and Russia” took place at the Moscow Patriarchate’s Department for External Church Relations.

Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Department for External Church Relations; Archbishop Sigitas Tamkevičius of Kaunas, president of the Lithuanian Episcopal Conference; and G. Demidov, representative of the Department for Religious Education and Catechization of the Russian Orthodox Church answered questions of the journalists.

Metropolitan Hilarion greeted representatives of mass media who came to the press conference given on the occasion of the completion of the 2nd talks between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church of Lithuania on current problems in teaching religion in the secular school.

The DECR chairman noted substantial progress in the matter: on 28 January 2012, the Government decreed that the teaching of “The Basics of Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics” will be compulsory for all schools. “We consider this as a very important move,” he said.

Archbishop Tamkevičius said that religion was taught in all schools in Lithuania. The Government pays for one lesson in a week, whereas the Church pays for more lessons in private schools. The teachers are trained at three universities, mostly at the faculty of theology in Kaunas. Priests and laymen are given the right to teach religion in Lithuania.

G. Demidov noted certain difficulties in the freedom of choice, training of teachers and methodology.

Metropolitan Hilarion believes that the number of religious lessons in Russian schools is not sufficient. “We welcome the first step, but we will work for increasing this number. I am sure that religious lessons once a week during all school years interest children in Lithuania.”

Metropolitan Hilarion spoke of his experience of teaching religion in a Russian school near the Kaunas cathedral in which he served in the early 90s. He gave a “trial” lesson, bur children took a lively interest

in the subject, and the future DECR chairman taught religion three days a week in all grades. “Teachers from another school asked me to teach their children, and I understood that I was becoming a school teacher rather than rector of the cathedral church. I gathered the most capable parishioners, taught them, and they began to teach religious lessons to many children in some Russian schools.”

This experience shows that the teaching of religion to children in all grades is “topical and important.” Religion will be taught in the fourth grade, but “I believe that the first-form boys and girls and senior school students should learn about religion,” Metropolitan Hilarion said. He hopes to continue dialogue with the state on a possibility of teaching “The Basics of Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics” in all grades.

Archbishop Tamkevičius spoke of the results of teaching religious subjects in Lithuanian schools. While the number of parishioners in the country is the same, their “quality” improves. One can see much more young people in churches. Besides, confessions show that young people are even wiser that those advanced in years.

The hierarch underscored that the Lithuanian model of the separation of the Church from the State differs from the Russian and French ones. “The Church and the State do not interfere in each other’s affairs, but they both care for people. Some 80% of the citizens of Lithuania are Catholics, and it goes without saying that the State should help them live out of their motives and convictions,” he said.

Metropolitan Hilarion told the journalists that in 1983 Archbishop Tamkevičius (then a priest) was a prisoner of conscience. He was arrested and tried on charges of anti-Soviet propaganda and spent several years in camps. Another Catholic priest from Lithuania was imprisoned several times for the same “crime”: he told children about religion. Metropolitan Hilarion reminded the audience that the teaching of religion was never interrupted in Lithuania: in Soviet time it was done in parishes.

Archbishop Tamkevičius called the years of his imprisonment “the gift of God.” He said that prisons had been the second theological seminary for me. “All subjects are theoretical in seminary, while in a prison a Christian can practice his faith,” he added.

Answering the question about relations between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church in Lithuania, Archbishop Tamkevičius called them very good.

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