Talks held in Moscow between Russian Orthodox Church and Roman Catholic Church in Lithuania on teaching religion in secular school

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On February 7, 2012, the 2nd talks between representatives the Russian Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church in Lithuania were held at the Moscow Patriarchate's department for external church relations in Moscow. The first meeting for such talks took place in January 2011 in Kaunas and was devoted to the theme 'Christians in face of the challenge to the institution of family'.

The theme of the 2nd talks was 'Current problems in teaching religion in the secular school'.

From the Russian Orthodox Church, key reports were made by Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, head of the department for external church relations, and G. Demidov, head of the Basic Orthodox Culture section of the department for religious education and catechism. The Roman Catholic Church in Lithuania was represented by Archbishop Sigitas Tamkjavichus of Kaunas, president of the Lithuanian Bishops' Conference, and Bishop Jonas Ivanauskas, Vicar General of Kaunas.

In his report, Metropolitan Hilarion underscored the importance of joint discussions on the pressing problems of the society today and possible ways of inter-church cooperation in this area. Thus, the theme of teaching religion in the secular school is one of the most pressing for both Churches as it directly concerns the problem of preservation of Christian identity in Europe today. The Orthodox hierarch was convinced that in a few years' time when passions raised by the debate on this issue subsided in Russia, the society would come to appreciate the positive pedagogic effect of religious education in the task of preserving national identity and improving the moral climate in Russian society.

Mr. Demidov, in his report, spoke about the cooperation maintained by church and state educational structures in teaching the Basic Orthodox Culture in school.

Archbishop Sigitas Tamkjavichus spoke about the practice of teaching religious disciplines in Lithuanian secular schools. He stressed that the religious and moral education of children is an inalienable constitutional right of Lithuanian citizens. Therefore, the traditional religious organizations are given the right to teach religion in general education schools and this teaching is financed by the state.

The participants in the talks stated that the implementation of the rights of schoolchildren in general education public schools to receive knowledge about religion does not contradict the principle of the secular nature of education. A study of both children's own religious tradition and basics of other religions constitutes a necessary element of moral and spiritual education of the personality and helps to consolidate inter-confessional peace and accord in society.

The participants pointed out the importance of continued bilateral dialogue between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church in Lithuania and regular meetings on specific issues.

The meeting summed up their discussion in a communique.

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