Speech by Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, Chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department of External Church Relations at the OSCE high- level meeting 'Preventing and Responding to Hate Incidents and Crimes against Christians' (Rome, Italy, 12 September 2011)

Mr. Chairman, dear participants in the meeting:

The Russian Orthodox Church considers it to be an important and timely initiative of Lithuania, the current chairman of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), to hold a special meeting dedicated to the position of Christians in the OSCE region. We value highly also the endeavours of the Holy See, which has taken an active part in organizing the event.

We believe that the time has come to discuss openly the violation of the rights of Christians and respond to this challenge through our common efforts. For decades now the encroachment upon of the rights of religious minorities has been widely discussed on the European continent. Yet, practice shows that the position of the majority, which is comprised of traditional Christians in almost all the OSCE participating states, is far from being the best guarantee of their rights. The most convincing example of this was the way the European Court of Human Rights conducted the Lautsi v. Italy case on the question of the presence of crucifixes in Italy's schools. The resolution of this problem in favour of Christians was possible thanks only to the united efforts of a whole number of countries that spoke out against the Court's original decision. Among the countries united in support of Christian identity in Europe were Russia, Armenia, Bulgaria, Greece, Lithuania, Malta, and others. This was an unprecedented for our times fact of multilateral cooperation on the grounds of common Christian values.

If in Europe and the OSCE region voices can be heard against the presence of Christian symbols in public life, and there are signs of other forms of an intolerant attitude towards Christians, then this is a good occasion to think upon the reasons for such things. There is a simple axiom, understandable to every educated European. European civilization is a culture that has developed on a Christian foundation. Today Europe, and indeed the entire OSCE region, has acquired a clearly expressed multicultural nature, having become a place of contact between peoples and religions from all over the world. Yet, does this mean that the cultural and religious diversity of Europe definitely threatens her Christian roots? Not at all. The real threat is not in offering to the continent's new religious and national communities the chance to make use of Christian hospitality. The basic danger is in attempting to use

religious diversity as an excuse to exclude signs of Christian civilization from the public and political realities of the continent, as though this would make our continent friendlier towards non-Christians. I am convinced that society, which has renounced its spiritual heritage under the pretext of the radical separation of religious life from public life, becomes vulnerable to the spirit of enmity in relation to representatives of any religion. This indeed does create an atmosphere of intolerance in relation to Christians, as well as to representatives of other traditional religions. This statement can be proved by many examples.

Spain, as well as a number of other countries, has recently introduced a course on 'Education in Citizenship' in school syllabuses for primary school pupils which include sex education. Within this course pupils are indoctrinated with views on sexual relations which are totally inconsistent with the religious beliefs of their parents. This practice of the course has already resulted in mass appeals to the courts, locally and internationally, but the problem remains unsolved at the European level.

Organizations in the OSCE countries responsible for notifying the public about cases of Christianophobia regularly report cases of persecution of Christians who criticize social evils, albeit that they are legally recognized. For example, clergy and lay believers who criticize homosexuality as sinful often face public ostracism or severe discrimination. Statutory guarantees of freedom of speech laid down in international law are always ignored in such cases.

Christians in the OSCE region are consistently attacked because of their position on abortion and euthanasia. Opponents not only fail to see that behind their false justifications lie the deprivation of human life, but they also question Christians' right to present their views and their democratic efforts to have them reflected in European legislation. It has been an encouragement and inspiration to see the recent recommendation of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe upholding the right to conscientious objection for medical workers who refuse to take part in such operations. I hope that refusal on grounds of conscientious objection will be an accepted approach in the educational and in public service spheres .

We are also concerned about the acts of vandalism aimed against Christian shrines that have become a sad social reality in contemporary OSCE region.

Nowadays, Russian Orthodox Church speaks openly about the necessity of protecting the rights of Christians outside Europe where their lives and health are under threat. These issues are at the top of the agenda when representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church visit the Middle East and North Africa and are discussed in numerous political contexts. In May this year the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church adopted a special statement on Christianophobia internationally, in which it expressed concern about the growth of persecution against Christians worldwide. The statement calls for the

development of a comprehensive and effective mechanism for protecting Christians and Christian communities subjected to persecution or to restrictions in their religious life and work. We believe that these efforts will improve the conditions of life of our brothers in faith. However, our voice calling for protection of Christians outside Europe will sound more confident and authoritative if it is backed by our co-operation in making OSCE states an example of the upholding of Christian rights and freedoms.

The analysis of research of cases of an intolerant attitude towards Christians demonstrates that the cases, as a rule, bear an anti-religious motive. People who ignore or infringe on the rights and legitimate interests of Christians are often guided by secular maximalism, that is, they proceed from the notion that religion is no more than the personal affair of the individual and does not have a social dimension. In recent years, the OSCE has come to realize that the dominant factor of radical secularism is as dangerous to religious freedom as religious extremism in all its manifestations. This change in position has become possible thanks only to the efforts of Christian non-governmental organizations which monitor Christianophobia in Europe.

So that the rights of Christians and representatives of other traditional religions in the OSCE region can be effectively defended, the Organization is called upon not only to react to crimes but also to act in consolidating peace between all of the region’s religions. To propose a model of a peaceful inter-civilizational coexistence is a difficult theoretical and practical task, and the search for its solution is impossible without the creation of interactive mechanisms of dialogue among traditional religious communities. This model is needed not only in the OSCE region but also throughout the world, including those places where Christians feel themselves to be especially vulnerable.

The building up of social relations which exclude or minimize the appearance of inter-religious enmity, is unthinkable without paying attention to religious and inter-cultural education, without setting up conditions for the embodiment of ideals of virtue, justice, and mercy in public life, common to the majority of traditional religions. I hope that the work of the OSCE in the sphere of guaranteeing freedom of conscience will be realized in the spirit of sincere partnership of national governments, international structures, experts, and religious leaders who are determined to contribute to inter-religious peace in the OSCE region.

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