



World public forum 'Dialogue of Civilizations' holds international conference on 'Mount Athos's Contribution to Europe's Religious and Intellectual Tradition' in Salzburg

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A conference on 'The Contribution of Mount Athos to Europe's Religious and Intellectual Tradition' was held on July 8-9, 2011, in Salzburg, Austria. It was organized by the Dialogue of Civilizations world public forum. Among the participants were Mr. Walter Schwimmer, former general secretary of the Council of Europe, Princess Katarina of Serbia, Great Britain, Prince George Yourievsky of the Romanov Family, Switzerland, representatives of the Friends of Mount Athos, Oxford, the Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies, Cambridge, the Amsterdam Center for Eastern Orthodox Theology, public and governmental bodies, the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England, business and scientific communities, as well as clergy from the Churches of Russia, Georgia, Greece and other Local Orthodox Churches and brethren from monasteries on the Holy Mount Athos.

The conference was opened by Mr. V. Yakunin, president of the Dialogue of Civilizations.

Rev. Andrey Yeliseyev, secretary of the Russian Orthodox Church representation to European international organizations in Brussels, read out a message of greetings from Metropolitan Hilarion, head of the Moscow Patriarchate's department for external church relations, which reads in particular, 'The existence of the European civilization is due to Christianity, as its basic values, mode of thinking and moral law which has prevailed for centuries – all go back to the evangelical mission of the disciples of Jesus Christ, the mission which embraced all the nations of the then oikoumene... The awareness of the contribution that Mount Athos has made in Europe's religious and moral tradition leads us to the important task to preserve the unique world of the Holy Mount for generation to come. This world has been created by the hands of a multinational monastic community with their special way of life, diversity of monastic achievements, warm hospitality towards pilgrims and strict internal silence'.

Archimandrite Ephraim, abbot of the Vatopedi Monastery, one of the largest monasteries on Mount Athos, said in his address that 'the modern man, who has made a great progress in technological and economic development, has failed to find an inner peace. That is the presence of Christ in our hearts. The Holy Mount is a place of peace, repentance, humbleness and joy as a special state of holiness, which is a fruit of the presence of the Holy Spirit. People in the West often see in humbleness an

inferiority complex, whereas it is the alpha and omega of spiritual experience... On the Holy Mount, one can meet truly humble monks and hear the Word given in experience’.

The official opening of the conference, which took place at the palace of Prince Archbishops of Salzburg, included an exhibition of the 19th century photographs from the album of Prince Constantine Constantinovich Romanov and today’s archives of the Vatopedi Monastery.

On Saturday, July 9, Archimandrite Ephraim celebrated the Divine Liturgy at the Romanian Orthodox church in Salzburg according to the Athonite rite.

During plenary and section sessions, participants spoke in one voice for the preservation of Mount Athos’s unique status, the need for comprehensive legal defence of the principle of ‘avaton’ whereby women are not allowed to the peninsula, against turning the Holy Mount into a free tourist zone or a place of commercialization and pointed to the tendency of interference in the internal life of the monasteries.

Mr. Schwimmer, who is chairman of the international coordinating committee of the Dialogue of Civilizations forum, stated that ‘the Holy Mount Athos is important for the cultural heritage of the whole world but in the first place for the spiritual and intellectual heritage of Europe. For this reason it is necessary to protect this place and to involve various forces in Europe and the world in this endeavour’.

Mr. Jan Figel, chairman of the Christian Democratic Movements in Slovakia and former Euro-commissioner for science, education and culture, said, ‘We [in the European Union] have a common market, a common currency but we still have failed to avoid a crisis... The importance of Christianity in Europe is enormous, and Christians have a clear system of values. Europe will be beautiful if the mosaic is united, not split into East and West’.

The director of the John XXIII Foundation for Religious studies, Alberto Melloni, Italy, put forward a proposal that Mount Athos become a training place for a new generation of young scholars who could work in today’s ‘post-secular’ society to preserve the sources of understanding Christian life.

Mr. S. Scheblygin, president of the St. Andrew the First-Called Foundation, spoke about relations between Russia and Mount Athos through, among other things, bringing over its shrines, assistance in restoring the St. Panteleimon Monastery and support for historical and art studies. He said, ‘We believe that the development of relations with Mount Athos as a center of religious, contemplative and spiritual life has a beneficial potential for the life of the whole Russian society. Indeed, Orthodox Christianity in Russia has become a spiritual foundation for people’s life in the vast lands from the Baltic Sea in the west to the Pacific Ocean in the Far East’.

Mr. S. Khoruzhiy, senior researcher at the Russian Academy of Sciences Institute of Philosophy said in his remarks that the old trends of secularism and driving religion out of public life have encountered a new tendency of 'post-secularism' with its return to religious values and desire of secular people and institutions to enter into dialogue with people of religious traditions. For this reason, today's philosophers and anthropologists are seeking new ways of understanding what is happening to man and society. And here the Athonite hesychasm as an inexhaustible source of not theoretical but empirical 'theology of energies' can offer much for the solution of this intellectual problem and open new prospects for the understanding of the 'synergetic' nature of man as participant in the Divine energy.

In summing up the discussions, Archpriest Anthony Ilyin, acting Russian Orthodox Church representative to European international organizations in Brussels, proposed to create 'a network community for support of Mount Athos not only within the European Union but also in the greater Europe' as 'a format for continued contacts between analysts and experts and for legal support of Mount Athos and as an internet portal'.

In his closing remarks, Archimandrite Ephraim invited the St. Andrew the First-Called Foundation to cooperation in studying and cataloguing Russian manuscripts found in the monastery. He also called to use the spiritual fruits of Mount Athos, noting that there are spiritual fathers who can give answers to the most urgent questions of the modern man.

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