Address by Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, Chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate Department for External Church Relations to the meeting of the European Council of Religious Leaders (21 June 2011, Church of Christ the Saviour, Moscow)

Distinguished participants in the 8th Meeting

of the European Council of Religious Leaders,

Allow me to welcome you to the cathedral Church of Christ the Saviour, which is a symbol of the revival of the Russian Orthodox Church. Over one thousand years ago, our people were enlightened with the light of Orthodoxy which entered every sphere of social life. Throughout centuries, our ancestors, going through sometimes severe trials, learnt to live in friendly relations with people of other faiths, first of all, with Jews, Muslims, and Buddhists. Russia has accumulated a unique experience of peaceful co-existence of religions which were to become traditional for our country, an experience of interreligious dialogue and cooperation for the benefit of the whole society. This indisputable richness may also be of benefit for other countries and peoples. I hope that the historical journey of the Russian Church and other religions in our country, which passed through a crucible of hardships in the 20th century, will become for this gathering a vivid example of the power of the human spirit inspired by faith and unsubdued by the theomachist state machine. And today's meeting of religious leaders from European countries is a testimony to the fact that the spiritual dimension is needed by society and that traditional religions are ready to meet together the challenges of time including those coming from aggressive secularism.

May I remind you that the Russian Orthodox Church in the person of Metropolitan Kirill, now His Holiness the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, was one of the architects of the European Council of Religious Leaders. In the early 2002, Metropolitan Kirill, together with other authoritative religious leaders in Europe, joined in a newly-established executive committee of the ECRL during the meeting of *Religions for Peace* in Paris. Some of those who made up this organization at that time are its members to this day and are present here. I would like to extend special greetings to them. They are Bishop Gunnar Stälsett and Jehangir Sarosh. In November 2002, the first summit of the ECRL took place in Oslo to be held annually since that time. The proposal to make the capital of Russia the place for another annual summit was made several years ago, and now eventually we have the joy to host the ECRL members and guests in Moscow.

In the final document of the ECRL meeting in 2004 in Brussels, it was stated that our Council was established to offer ‘an open, clear and regular dialogue’ to European international institutions. The history of our organization has shown that the united voice of the leaders of historical religions in Europe is heard in the Council of Europe and in the European Union bodies. We should continue addressing those who belong to the leading structures of European institutions with regard to the problems of concern for us. It is especially true for human rights and freedoms, that is, the themes to which the present meeting is devoted.

His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia has spoken today about the indisputable ties between human rights and freedoms and the notion of dignity and responsibility. In my turn, I would like to dwell on one right which is very important for the human personality – the right to freedom of conscience and religion. This fundamental right is recognized by all the traditional religions. We invariably come out against any form of violence, persecution and discrimination on religious grounds.

Europe has Christian roots and the based on them tradition of ensuring and defending human rights and freedoms, this being a key notion of European civilization. At our earlier meetings, we have talked about the inadmissibility of persecution and infringement of human rights on religious grounds: anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and Christianophobia. I would like to dwell on this theme in detail.

As analytical studies have shown, it is Christians who most often have become victims of religious persecution in today’s world. According to the recently published data, at least one hundred million Christians are subjected to persecution and discrimination in the world, with at least one million of them being children. At present we are experiencing an era of large-scale persecution against Christians. Not many people in problem-free countries in Europe are aware of that, and if they are, they prefer not to react. International European institutions as well as public and human rights organizations are trying to draw the public attention to this tragedy. We are grateful to them for their not indifferent position.

Thus, the European Parliament adopted on January 20th 2011 a resolution *On the Situation of Christians in the Context of Religious Freedom*, in which European politicians call ‘to develop as a matter of urgency an EU strategy on the enforcement of the human right to freedom of religion including a list of measures against states who knowingly fail to protect religious denominations’. A little later a similar resolution was adopted by the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly. The resolution calls ‘to raise awareness about the need to combat all forms of religious fundamentalism and the manipulation of religious beliefs for political reasons, which are so often the cause of present day terrorism’ and recommends ‘to develop a Council of Europe strategy to ensure respect for freedom of religion as a human right.’

Our Church expressed her concern over the growing persecution of Christians in the world in a special statement of the Holy Synod on May 30th, 2011, which is available in English to every participant in our summit. It states in particular, 'Christians are subjected to persecution and become victims of intolerance and discrimination in various forms. The recent tragic events on May 7 and 8 in Egypt's Giza, when Christian churches were set on fire during mass disturbances and parishioners of the Coptic Church were killed, are only one link in the chain of such developments. Our brothers and sisters are killed, driven away from their homes, separated from their families and friends, deprived of the right to confess their religious beliefs and to bring up their children in accordance with their faith. Regrettably, manifestations of Christianophobia can no longer be treated as individual incidents as they have become a stable tendency in some parts of the world. The events in Egypt referred to in the Holy Synod's statement are only a part of a more global process which affects the life of Christians in a number of countries, for instance, in such countries as Iraq and Pakistan.

I would like to underscore that extremism committed under Islamic banners by no means should be identified with Islam which confesses tolerance between people of different religions. I had an additional occasion to see it a week ago during my meeting with the president, professors and students of Al-Azhar, the world largest Islamic university. This Egyptian university set itself as one of its tasks to educate young Muslims in the spirit of tolerance. I was also deeply moved by a letter the chairman of the Muftiate's Council of Ulemas in Russia, Farid Salman, sent to the president of Al-Azhar expressing sincere concern over the forced exodus of Christians from Muslim lands.

We should also reflect on the ways in which a system of protecting Christians against persecution can be created. The creation of this system could involve political leaders of the European Union as well as heads of states in Europe, Russia and other CIS countries, Christian confessions and representatives of other religions, especially Muslims. It is only through joint efforts that we can stop the wave of extremism which has engulfed the Middle East, threatening the very survival of Christianity in some countries of that region. I would like to have this theme reflected in the final document of the Moscow meeting.

Another problem which becomes increasingly topical today is aggressive secularism. People of this worldview believe that religion should be fully separated not only from the state but also from society. They believe it should not influence pubic processes or be involved in social and educational processes.

In Europe there are hundreds of millions of believers. Official information shows that most of the population in the European continent belongs to Christian faith. The second largest religion in Europe is Islam and the number of its followers is steadily growing. Non-religious people, atheists and agnostics, comprise a minority in every country in Europe. This information refutes the persistently propagated myth that the European society is secular in nature and that most people on our continent are not interested in religion. However, for all that, many politicians deny to religion the right to public self-

expression. Religion is seen as a private affair of individuals which has nothing to do with the public domain. They seek to drive religion in a ghetto and to reduce it to ‘private devotion’ alone regulated by non-religious authorities.

From the point of view of proponents of secularism, interreligious dialogue should be conducted under the patronage of secular institutions for the reason that religious leaders are allegedly incapable of coming to an agreement with each other. The unique nature of our Council lies in the fact that it was and, I hope, will remain an association independent of any secular structure and uniting authoritative representatives of traditional religions in Europe. And at the same time, for the sake of the common good, we are always open to an equal, honest and open dialogue both with governmental institutions and all the healthy forces in society.

In conclusion I would like to express hope that our Council, entering the second decade of its existence, will preserve and multiply the very useful experience it has accumulated in the past years. In my view, our principal task is to bear witness to the importance of faith for the destiny of Europe, to her positive and peacemaking potential capable of making people’s life safe and spiritually rich.

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