# DECR chairman speaks on persecution of Christians at the European Council of Religious Leaders meeting

On June 21, 2011, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, head of the Moscow Patriarchate's department for external church relations, spoke during the first session of the European Council of Religious Leaders (ECRL) which took place at the Church Councils Hall of the Church of Christ the Saviour in Moscow.

His Eminence Hilarion reminded the participants that the Russian Orthodox Church, in the person of now Patriarch Kirill 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, made up the newly-formed executive council of the ECRL at the meeting of Religions for Peace in Paris.

In his remarks, Metropolitan Hilarion spoke in detail about the inadmissibility of persecution against people and violation people's rights on religious grounds. He cited statistics about the cases of persecution and discrimination to which at least 100 million Christians have been subjected, with at least one million children among them. 'At present we are experiencing an era of persecution against Christians the largest in scale in the last two thousand years. In the problem-free European countries, few people are aware of it, but even if they are they prefer not to react'. According to the DECR chairman, international European institutions such as the European Parliament, the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly as well as public and human rights organizations are trying to draw public attention to this tragedy.

'Our Church expressed her concern for the growing persecution of Christians in the world in a special statement of the Holy Synod made on May 30, 2011', he said. He pointed out that the tragic events in Egypt's Giza on May 7 and 8, when Christian churches were set on fire and parishioners of the Coptic Church were killed 'is only a part of the more global process affecting the life of Christians in a number of countries, such as Iraq and Pakistan'. Nevertheless, he underscored, 'extremism committed under Islamic slogans by no means can be identified with Islam which preaches tolerance towards people of other faiths'.

Metropolitan Hilarion proposed that the Council think over the way of creating a system for the protection of Christians against persecution. 'The creation of such a system could involve representatives of the political leadership of the European Council, heads of states in Europe, Russia and other CIS countries, Christians confessions and representatives of other religions, especially

Muslims. It is only through common effort that we can stop the wave of extremism which has engulfed the Middle East and posed a threat to the very survival of Christians in some countries of that region', he said. He also expressed the wish that the final document of the Moscow meeting reflected this theme.

Another problem pointed out by the DECR chairman is aggressive secularism. 'From the point of view of proponents of secularism, interreligious dialogue should be held under the patronage of secular institutions on the grounds that religious leaders are allegedly incapable of reaching an agreement with each other. The uniqueness of our Council lies in the fact that it was and, I hope, will remain an association which is independent of any secular structure and which unites authoritative representatives of traditional religions in Europe. And at the same time, for the sake of the common good, we are always open to equal, honest and frank dialogue both with governmental institutions and all the healthy forces in society', His Eminence Hilarion testified.

Mr. Sampaio, UN secretary general's high representative for the Alliance of Civilizations, sent a video-address to the ECRL meeting, informing of his intention to make the protection of human dignity as set in the ECRL agenda a focus of the Alliance of Civilizations forum to take place in December 2011, in Doha, Qatar.

The first plenary session also discussed the theme 'Human rights and traditional values in Europe'. A presentation on this theme was made by Bishop Gunnar Staelsett, a co-moderator of the ECRL.

*DECR Communication Service*

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