



## **Patriarch Kirill opens the Moscow meeting of the European Council of Religious Leaders**

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The European Council of Religious Leaders (ECRL) opened its meeting on 21 June 2011, at the Church Councils Hall of the Church of Christ the Saviour in Moscow. It is the first meeting to be held by the Council in Moscow and its theme is 'Human Rights and Traditional Values in Europe'.

Founded in 2002, the Council unites religious leaders in Europe who represent Christianity, Islam and Judaism. Among the participants in the ECRL are also Buddhists, Hindu, Sikhs and Zoroastrians. The task of the Council is to prevent conflicts and to promote peaceful coexistence among religious communities in the European continent. It has 45 members.

The Russian Orthodox Church is represented by the chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's department for external church relations, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, who is co-moderator of the Council. Among the participants in the Moscow meeting are also Metropolitan Emmanuel of France (Patriarchate of Constantinople), Bishop Johannes of Thermopylae (Church of Greece), Bishop Gunnar Staelsett (Lutheran Church of Norway), Sheikh Ibrahim Mogra of the Islamic Council in Great Britain, Russia's Chief Rabbi A. Shaevich, and other representatives of European religious traditions.

The meeting was opened with an address by His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia. He welcomed the participants in the European Council of Religious Leaders to Moscow. He noted that human rights was the most discussed item on the international agenda and said, 'In our view, no religious community can stay apart from this discussion. The Russian Orthodox Church also has her own view of this problem – a view rooted in our church tradition and historical experience through which our Church has gone, especially in the 20<sup>th</sup> century'.

The Primate of the Russian Church believes that the worldview of a believer is unthinkable without the understanding of human freedom and dignity, which has been cherished by religious communities from of old. He noted in particular that in Christian tradition, freedom is an expression of God's image in man. Other religions have their own understanding of freedom as well. 'For this reason, leaders of religious communities are called to be ready to defend their position on this problem in the world socio-political discourse, taking care of the true welfare and happiness of every person. I am convinced that for religious communities to speak of human dignity, freedom and rights is not a matter of participation in politics but a duty and calling', he said.

The Russian Orthodox Church adopted in 2008 a Basic Teaching on Human Freedom, Dignity and Rights. This document reflects the Orthodox attitude to topical problems concerning the understanding of human freedom, dignity and rights. It also offers an opportunity to link it with the secular doctrine of human rights. According to His Holiness, the main reason for elaborating this document is a concern that the human rights concept may develop in a direction which excludes its relation to moral responsibility. 'As religious leaders, we should not take the attitude of moral neutrality. Inadmissible are attempts to adapt our religious teaching to the modern demands of political correctness, which turns man into a soulless machine of consumption, driven by passions'. He also expressed the conviction that the feeling of freedom is inseparable from the understanding of responsibility, saying, 'It is the totality of freedom and responsibility that gives guidelines for the development of both the individual and society as a whole'.

In conclusion of his address, Patriarch Kirill expressed hope that the meeting of the European Council of Religious Leaders will 'make its own contribution to the intellectual enrichment of the European society with values of religious tradition, which for centuries has asserted the Europeans in their desire of justice to be fulfilled in accordance with moral norms formed by this tradition'.

In his response, the ECRL co-moderator, Bishop Gunnar Staelsett thanked Patriarch for his decision to host the meeting of the Council. He spoke about the positive experience of cooperation with the Russian Orthodox Church, which amounts to more than one decade. Interreligious cooperation did not cease either during the cold war or in the situation of the modern globalization. Bishop Gunnar Staelsett also set forth his own understanding of prospects for the discussion on traditional values and human rights in the course of future meetings of the ECRL.

Earlier on June 21, the ECRL Executive Committee met at the Danilovsky Hotel. Metropolitan Hilarion took part in it.

The meeting of the Council is held with the financial support of the St. George the Theologian Charity.

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