Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk: European Parliament resolution is a revolutionary one

On 20 January 2011, the European Parliament took an unprecedented step by adopting a resolution on the situation of Christians in the context of freedom of religion. It is for the first time that a major political body of the European Union recognized that Christians are persecuted.

The chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations made the following comments:

On 19 and 20 January 2011, the European Parliament discussed many cases of violence against Christians in different parts of the world. In the evening of January 19, the EP members lit candles to commemorate Christian victims of the recent terrorist attacks. On January 20, resolution on the situation of Christians in the context of freedom of religion was adopted. It condemns killing or discrimination of Christians in various countries, particularly in Egypt, Nigeria, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, and the Philippines. The EP deputies made public the information showing atrocious persecution of Christians in these countries. The resolution addressed to their governments and leaders was adopted by the majority. Representatives of all political parties present in the EP voted in the affirmative.

The deputies expressed their wish to set up a permanent body at the Union for Foreign Affairs to monitor the situation of religious freedom in the world and annually inform the EU bodies and general public on the cases of infringing freedom of conscience by authorities or public forces in various countries.

A direct occasion for the resolution was a terrorist attack against worshipers in a Coptic church in Alexandria on 1 January 2011, killing 21 and leaving 97 wounded. A week later, Ministers of Foreign Affairs of France, Italy, Hungary, and Poland sent a letter to Catherine Ashton, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and demanded a reaction of the European community.

The EP resolution is a revolutionary one due to several moments. It is for the first time that the European parliamentarians stated in full voice their opinion on the problem they have preferred to keep silent about so far. Thus, a major political body of the European Union has recognized the persecution of Christians in the world. Earlier, only certain politicians have confined themselves to talks about certain violations of the rights of Christians in a particular country. Now they are talking openly of the strategy of some terrorist organizations and fundamentalist movements aimed at the destruction or ousting of Christians

living in the Moslem countries as “the fifth column” of the West.

Besides, a thorough attention was paid for the first time to the work of people gathering objective information about persecution of Christians in the world. For instance, it was for the first time that information contained in the annual report prepared by a non-governmental organization, “Kirche-in-Not,” was made public officially. According to it, there were seventy-five Christians out of each one hundred killed as a result of religious intolerance in recent years. This statistics is stunning.

The European Parliament addressed the EU bodies and proposed concrete methods of influencing the situation. The principle is simple: money and business in exchange for the observance of human rights. Economic agreements between the EU countries and the states with the recorded violation of religious freedom of Christians and other religious minorities should be concluded only when the situation of the infringed in their rights religious groups is improved.

It is necessary today, as never before, for the European countries to stand up for the rights of Christians persecuted for their faith in various corners of the globe. Representatives of the authorities and pubic movements demand to resolutely condemn resolutely violence against Christians and state the necessity to put pressure upon those countries in which the rights of religious minorities are violated.

We are witnessing cases of not only gross violence against Christians, but also of their physical destruction. The blood of Christians is again being poured on the land of Biblical history, the site of glorious heroic deeds of the martyrs and confessors of the Church. The 2^{nd-}century Christian writer Tertullian wrote that “the blood of martyrs is the seed of Christianity.” The nature of Christian faith is such that any violence against conscience or religious feeling of a Christian does not harm the faith, but makes it even stronger. However, this does not mean that we could look calmly at lawlessness perpetrated against Christians. Any case should be thoroughly investigated, publicly discussed, and leaders of traditional religions should pay attention to it.

Not only world Christian communities, but also Muslims, Jews, and representatives of other traditional religions do not stay indifferent to the recent acts of violence. It is a paradox that news of the oppression of Christians come sometimes from those regions of the world where representatives of different religions have peacefully coexisted for centuries, and any manifestation of Christianphobia, Islamophobia and anti-Semitism have always been implicitly denounced by the leaders of traditional religious communities.

Much attention is paid in the EP Resolution to the necessity of observing religious freedom enshrined in fundamental international and European documents. Also, monitoring instruments are proposed. However, these important and timely appeals would bring the sought-for results only in case they are

followed by setting up an effective and regular mechanism of dialogue between religious communities and the national and international structures. The European Parliament urged all EU institutions to maintain dialogue in compliance with Art. 17 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. Yet one should remember that monitoring of religious freedom in Europe and in the world should be supplemented by and connected with a dialogue between international structures and religious communities.

In recent decades, the Russian Church has focused it attention on the setting up such a mechanism. To promote this idea, representations of the Moscow Patriarchate have been established at the major international organizations in New York, Geneva, Brussels, and Strasbourg. The protection of Christian heritage and the rights of Christians is a priority issue in the work of our church structures. The same subjects are the main ones for cooperation between the Russian Church and inter-Christian organizations.

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