



## **His Holiness Patriarch Kirill meets with President of the Latvian Republic Valdis Zatlers**

On 20 December 2010, the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church met with the President of the Latvian Republic, Valdis Zatlers. The meeting took place at the Patriarch's working residence in Chisty sidestreet, Moscow.

The Latvian President was accompanied by his wife Ms. Lilita Zatlers; Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Latvian Republic to the Russian Federation Edgars Skuja; head of the President's Chancery Edgars Rinkevichs; state secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Andris Teikmanis; Riga Mayor Nil Ushakov; foreign relations advisor to the President, Andris Pelsh; and advisor to the President, Vasily Melnik.

Taking part in the meeting were also Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations; Metropolitan Alexander of Riga and All Lat via; and Bishop Alexander of Daugavpils.

Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Russian Federation to the Latvian Republic A. Veshnyakov and the third secretary of the Second European Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs S. Abramkin represented the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia cordially greeted the President of Latvia and his suite, expressing his hope for the first visit of Valdis Zatlers to Moscow to serve to the strengthening of friendly relations between people of the two countries.

His Holiness noted with appreciation the high level of relations between the Latvian Republic and the Russian Orthodox Church. "It is an encouraging fact that the Law on the Latvian Orthodox Church has come into force in Latvia in 2008. I consider this fact to be very positive as it gives the Church an opportunity to act without hindrance," he underscored and added that this law was an example to other countries.

"Respect of the rights of believers is a very important thing," His Holiness continued, emphasizing that church marriages are legally certified in Latvia. This gives people an opportunity to see the importance of the Church in family matters.

It was also noted that the [Latvian Republic support social ministry of the Church, including pastoral care for the Orthodox soldiers in the Army and inmates of penitentiary institutions.

His Holiness Patriarch Kirill mentioned claims of schismatic groups to the property of the Latvian Orthodox Church and said: "We hope that the Latvian Orthodox Church will be protected by the law, and no attempt of dishonest people will be realized.

The Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church thanked the leaders and people of the Latvian Republic for their attention to the Orthodox Christians living in the country, for instance, for the recent decision of the Latvian Seim to make the Nativity of Christ celebrated in accordance with the Julian calendar an official holiday. I know that you congratulate the Orthodox Christians with Christmas and I know how their hearts respond. This is a very good tradition," His Holiness said.

Regarding the role of the Orthodox Church in educating the young generation, His Holiness noted: "Many countries, including Russia and those in Western Europe, worry about morality of the youth. The loss of moral orientation by the young generation is dangerous for the future of human civilization. All institutes of civil society, the Church including, should play an active role in the education of the youth." His Holiness is confident that "The Christian Teaching" interconfessional subject taught in the Latvian schools brings an important contribution to the stabilization of social sphere, moral education of the youth, and the betterment of interethnic relations in Latvian society.

As to the interethnic relations, His Holiness said: "All countries that appeared after the disintegration of the Soviet Union have inherited many difficulties due to the negative influence of prevailing ideology on human lives. These are different negative responses to it, including those of ethnic character. We in Russia have been thinking a lot about this problem, as the growth of nationalism poses a threat to life, prosperity, and respect of rights of people belonging to other ethnic groups. As far as we understand, Latvia is not free of this legacy. I would like to express my hope and confidence that under your leadership the Latvian Republic will do anything possible to remove the remnants of the interethnic tension from society.

"I say all this with special sentiments after the recent events in Moscow. I believe that we should pay a particular attention to the interethnic problems in modern multicultural, multiethnic, and multireligious society."

His Holiness also spoke about the Russian-speaking community in Latvia. "We know about the problems of employment and education, including that in the Russian language, and we would like these difficulties to be overcome as soon as possible."

In the talk with the President of the Latvian Republic, which is a member of the European Union, a concern was expressed over certain processes in modern Europe, including the attitude of the State and society to the presence of Christian faith in public life, for instance, in Italy.

"We lived in the Soviet Union at the time when crosses were taken down from churches and know only too well what the struggle of the state with religious symbols can bring about. Any attempt to oust visible signs of religious presence from public life should not be justified by human rights, religious freedom, or the fact that Western European societies are multicultural and multiconfessional. Religions should play an active part in the life of society so that no one, including Christians, has an impression that his religious beliefs are not welcome in the state and society."

The President of the Latvian Republic noted that his country enjoys complete religious freedom. Christian confessions resolve together the problems of people, this being a characteristic feature of the Latvian state.

President Zatlers also noted an important part played by the Latvian Orthodox Church in the life of believers living in the country and underscored the importance of the work of Metropolitan Alexander of Riga and All Latvia in educating the youth and upholding of morality, adding that the Latvian Orthodox Church has done a lot for people of different nationalities, including those who pray in the Latvian language: there are Latvian parishes for them.

His Holiness Patriarch Kirill said that the Russian Orthodox Church is multinational, as it has parishes in sixty-two countries of the world. "May the Lord grant the Latvian Orthodox Church to be a factor of good relations between Russia and Latvia and among other neighboring countries," His Holiness said and added that one of the Church's ministries is to change relations among people and nations for the better.

The President of Latvia invited His Holiness the Patriarch to visit the country. The Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church thanked him for invitation and said that he had visited Latvia many times and had warm recollections of these visits.

In conclusion of the meeting, the sides exchanged presents.