Code on Holy Sites presented in Istanbul

On 28 April 2010, Code on Holy Sites was presented at the session of the European Council of Religious Leaders. The document, compiled on the initiative of representatives of religious communities and expert circles from different countries, was adopted at the Conference in Trondheim in 2009. It was prepared with the aim of regulating the situation with holy sites of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism.

The document seeks to define the notion of holy sites: "Holy sites are places of religious significance for particular religious communities. They include, but are not limited to, places of worship, cemeteries and shrines, incorporating their immediate surroundings when these form an integral part of the site. For the purposes of this Code, holy sites are places of defined and limited area that are designated as such by each religious community according to its customs, recognizing also that a single site can be sacred to more than one community."

Certain provisions of the document are about the preservation of holy sites and access to them, a situation in which a single site is sacred to more than one religion, or when it is located in the area of military conflict. The relevant authorities shall take measures to facilitate the reconstruction of a holy site damaged in conflict, and see to its possible nationalization. The Code proposes to develop education on holy sites and to set up an international mechanism to monitor the implementation of the Code.

Deputy chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations hegumen Philipp (Ryabykh), who took part in the ECRL session, thanked the authors of the document for their work. He believe it to be a good basis for promoting the initiative in international organizations, for instance in UNESCO. He added, however, that there were many problems that need enhancement: "Measures should be specified of protecting holy sites if they are threatened by desecration or destruction, of free access, of protecting legal rights of a religious organization to which a holy site belongs, and of a more close cooperation between the proposed international mechanism with religious communities in order to avoid violation of cultural and spiritual traditions and customs of these communities and also with national authorities that should not see any limitation of their sovereignty in the work of this international organizations."

In conclusion hegumen Philipp noted that representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church were ready to take an active part in the enhancement and promotion of the document that could play a positive part in the search for the ways to settle conflicts in the troubled areas of the world.

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