



## **‘In face of aggressive secularism, religious communities in Europe should act in unity’ – DECR vice-chairman**

The European Council of Religious Leaders, taking place on April 26-28 in Istanbul, discussed on its second day the themes ‘Solidarity. Poverty in Africa and Migration in Europe – a Global Challenge for Religions’ and ‘Equality – More Equal Than Others? Minarets, Minorities and European Identity’.

As a key speaker on the second theme, Hegumen Philip Riabykh, vice-chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate’s department for external church relations, addressed the experience of interreligious dialogue in Russia, saying in particular, ‘When it comes to Russia, many foreigners wonder at her size and cultural and ethnic diversity. Indeed, how does such a vast country has managed to exist for centuries, reconciling and integrating different traditions and interests? In the past, with the exception of the 70 years of official atheism, and at present religion has played an important role in forming attitudes to various social problems in Russia. If the Orthodox, Muslims, Jews and Buddhists had only thought about their own corporate interests, we would have never lived in such a big and strong country. The only way for developing a society in such conditions is to put forward such ideas that would enable most people in it to defend their interests and expectations. For instance, it is in this spirit that the traditional religions in Russia have recently proposed to deal with the problem of values-orientated education of the younger generation. The new course of spiritual and moral education in secondary schools presupposes an opportunity for citizens to choose as studies for their children between the basics of their own religious tradition, a general religious course and secular ethics’.

Father Philip drew the attention of the meeting to the changes that happened in recent decades in Europe’s religious map due to the inflow of migrants from Africa and Asia: ‘Migrants are coming from countries in which religion plays a significant role in both private and public life. Many of them wish to be integrated in the life of European countries, while having an opportunity to express their religious tradition in the public sphere. This wish is certainly a challenge to the established forms of public life in many European countries. Firstly, because it violates the age-old balance between various religious groups who have long existed in the European continent. Secondly, it is a challenge to the Christian majority which has been increasingly secularized since the Enlightenment and its Churches have lost their once great influence in society. Though in the East of Europe this process was artificially accelerated in the times of official atheism’.

The priest stressed that many European countries sought to change their policy and integrate new

religious and ethnic minorities in their life. 'Some in Europe insists on the need to secularize new members of the European family as a condition for their 'adoption'. At the same time, they stand for a full 'liberation' of the public space from Christian symbols, alleging that the presence of these symbols violate the rights of these same minorities'. Father Philip said. He remarked that it was in this spirit that the European Court of Human Rights made its recent decision in the case of Soile Lautsi against the presence of crucifixes in Italian schools. He said that 'the very situation is utterly absurd. The lawsuit of a single person has delivered a colossal blow on the centuries-honored religious and cultural tradition of a particular country. Moreover, the banning of Christian symbols in schools would radically change not only Italian but also common European self-awareness as a whole'. He stressed that the same secularism stood behind the protests against minarets in Switzerland or the adoption of laws restricting some elements of clothes demonstrating one's religious affiliation.

The DECR vice-chairman stated that such cases proved that in some European countries no distinction was made between the presence of religious minorities and religious majority in the public sphere. 'We are all in the same boat. Therefore, we should support one another. In the face of aggressive secularism, religious communities in Europe should act in unity. We should not consider separately the problems of a religious majority and those of religious minorities. These problems should be considered in their interdependence. It is unacceptable to provide one religious group however small and underprivileged it may be with a better position at the expense of the rights and interests of the other group. There should be no presumption of believers' guilt before human rights organizations only because, say, Christians comprise a majority in Europe while Muslims are a majority in Arabia or the Middle East', he said.

The priest emphasized that 'the way leading to stability and peace in Europe lies through the preservation and multiplication of the already existing traditions and at the same time the creation of conditions for a full-fledged life of religious communities which have appeared as a result of migration. It is better to add than to subtract. The observation of the principle whereby the full-fledged presence of a religious tradition in a society's public sphere is made dependent on the number of its followers, authority and contribution to the social harmony has created such country as Russia and may help today in building a common Europe.'

According to Father Philip, the opinions about a confrontation existing between various religious traditions in Europe are clearly exaggerated. 'This confrontation is sometimes deliberately imitated through the mass media in order to prove the need to take the course of tough secularization on both national and common European level. Reality is different, however, as religious organizations today as never before manage to find a common language both in working out common decisions for social problems and in showing respect for the status of a religious majority and the rights of religious minorities. Social tension is created by forces who stand for continuing the radical secularization in

Europe and by those religious extremists who profit by any instability as it brings them closer to a change in the social order. As is known, extremes meet. It is planned to adopt at this meeting of the Council a declaration on tolerance. I believe it is secularists and extremists who should be called to it, since traditional religions have already gained it through the centuries of their existence. Now the world should wish to see and support it'.

In the discussion that followed many representatives of small religious communities in Europe spoke for the preservation of the Christian heritage of European nations. Some of them noted that those who had nothing to do with their communities appropriated the right to speak for them. According to the participants, such organizations as the European Council of Religious Leaders should become a mouthpiece of undistorted positions held by Europe's religious community and promote mutual understanding and respect in the continent.

*DECR Communication Service*

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