



His Holiness Patriarch Kirill meets with the Lebanese President Michel Suleiman

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On 25 February 2010, the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church met with the Lebanese President Michel Suleiman at the Patriarchal chambers of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour.

They were joined in the meeting by Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate Department for external church relations; Archbishop Nifon of Philippopolis, representative of the Patriarch of Antioch and All the East at the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia; the Very Revd. Nikolai Balashov, DECR deputy chairman; the Revd. Igor Yakimchuk, acting DECR secretary for inter-Orthodox relations; and DECR staff member M. Palasio.

The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was represented by a special representative of the Russian President for the Middle East and deputy foreign minister A. Saltanov; Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Russian Federation to Lebanon S. Bukin; Ambassador at Large of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs A. Vdovin; and head of the Syria and Lebanon section of the Middle East and North Africa Department A. Panov.

The President of the Republic of Lebanon was accompanied by the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Elias Murr; Minister of Foreign Affairs and Emigrants Ali Ash-Shami; Minister of State Adnan Kassar; Minister of Economy and Trade and Lebanese chairman of the Russian-Lebanese Commission for trade and economic cooperation Mohammad Safadi; Minister of Industry Abraham Dadian; Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Lebanon to the Russian Federation Assem Jaber; and general director of the Presidential Administration Najji Abi Assi.

His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia greeted the high guest and called President Suleiman's visit to Moscow a historic event, as it is the first presidential visit to Russia. "I am confident that your visit and negotiations in Moscow will be fruitful and will serve to the good of the people of our countries."

His Holiness underscored that the Russian Orthodox Church has maintained friendly cordial relations with the Lebanese people for many years and recalled the meetings of his predecessors at the Moscow Patriarchal Throne with the Lebanese leaders. "I am happy to have an opportunity to receive the President of the Republic of Lebanon on behalf of the Russian Orthodox Church."

His Holiness mentioned President Suleiman's walk in life as a professional military man who has passed all stages of the difficult and dangerous military service and exerted a lot of efforts to restore peace in his country. "The Lebanese people elected you President at a very crucial time. They have chosen you with the hope for peace and justice in the country, for freedom, sovereignty, independence, and integrity of Lebanon."

The Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church emphasized that the religious factor has always played a very important part in the political life of Lebanon and often contributed to the consolidation of society and to reasonable balance of power. Recalling the tragic civil war that flared up thirty-five years ago, His Holiness said: "We thank God for the Lebanese people's overcoming this trouble and this conflict. Today we see the deepening of interconfessional dialogue in the country and note the reasonable and balanced policy pursued by the authorities who are trying to render assistance to this dialogue."

His Holiness also spoke about the situation in the Middle East where fundamental problems that engender conflicts in the region have not been resolved.

His Holiness Patriarch Kirill said that the Russian Orthodox Church had been exerting great efforts to take part in the making of decisions that could have helped people to overcome fundamental differences among them. "We maintain regular dialogue with governments of the Russian Federation and of other countries, with the Patriarchate of Antioch and other Christian communities in the Middle East. We listen attentively to what people of the region say and try to bring our peace message to them. Together with the Patriarchate of Antioch we participate in the solution of a number of humanitarian problems by rendering material aid."

The development of Orthodox pilgrimage in Lebanon was an important subject of discussion. His Holiness Patriarch Kirill remarked that Lebanon has always been attractive for Russian pilgrims. The 19th century was marked by a great number of them. The Russian Orthodox visited Saida and proceeded to the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan Valley.

His Holiness said that pilgrimage to the holy places was a spiritual need of people and at the same time had economic and political aspects. "Hundred of thousand Russian people come to the Middle East nowadays as pilgrims. Their number can well rise to a million. However, the flows of pilgrims pass by Lebanon, and we should think about the maximum involvement of Lebanon into the system of Orthodox pilgrimage from Russia and Eastern Europe."

His Holiness proposed to establish more strong relations between the Lebanese Ministry of Tourism and the Russian Orthodox Church. "The Department for external church relations represented here by its chairman, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, could be actively involved in the elaboration of all these

issues. Pilgrimage at present certainly demands modern infrastructure. We could have thought about it together."

The Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church remarked that Russian diaspora in Lebanon had begun with pilgrimages in the 19th century. Russian people living in the country have brought their contribution to the making of statehood in Lebanon, into its system of education and culture. Russian diaspora in Lebanon numbers seven-ten thousand people at present according to different estimations.

"In your person I would like to thank the authorities of Lebanon for their good attitude to Russian people in your country," His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia told the President of the Republic of Lebanon.

He also spoke about cooperation with the Patriarchate of Antioch in pastoral care for Russian people in Lebanon. For instance, there is a Russian Orthodox parish in Beirut. His Holiness welcomed the decision of the Beirut authorities to allot a plot of land for Russian cemetery and added that economic problems in Lebanon, including unemployment, affect Russian diaspora, too.

His Holiness Patriarch Kirill noted good relations between the Orthodox Churches of Antioch and Russia, adding that official representations of the Patriarch of Antioch in Moscow and of the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia in Damascus do much to promote these relations. His Holiness highly appreciated the work done by Archbishop Nifon of Philippopolis, the representative of the Church of Antioch in Moscow, who "excellently represents his Church and his country here and plays a very positive part in the religious life in Moscow."

"According to tradition, I, as a newly elected Patriarch, should pay visits to the Primate of the fraternal Local Orthodox Churches," His Holiness said. "My visit to Syria and Lebanon is planned for November 2010. I am looking forward to this visit. I know your country well as I visited it many times, and I would like to tell you that I am willing to render maximum assistance to the development of relations of Lebanon with Russia, Ukraine, Byelorussia, and other countries that comprise the canonical territory of the Russian Orthodox Church."

His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia announced that the Russian Orthodox Church was willing to assist the development of humanitarian relations between the two countries. He mentioned cooperation with the Orthodox University of Balamand in the north of Lebanon and expressed his hope for the development of student exchange programme.

The head of the Republic of Lebanon thanked His Holiness the Patriarch for the meeting and said that "President Medvedev's invitation to visit the Russian Federation has given us an opportunity to recall the

relations between Lebanon and Russia in all spheres, including those which you, Your Holiness, deemed it wise to mention, namely, culture and religion." The Lebanese President spoke about warm friendly relations maintained by Russia and Lebanon from the 18th century and expressed his hope for their development.

President Suleiman hopes to continue this talk during the upcoming visit of the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church to Lebanon. His Holiness Patriarch Kirill told the President of Lebanon about his recent visit to Ukraine where he gave his blessing to the new President of the country. "I am not the Patriarch of the Russian Federation. I am the Patriarch of the Russian Church, which canonical territory includes fifteen states," His Holiness emphasized.

In conclusion of the meeting, His Holiness presented the President of Lebanon with a set of enameled candlesticks.

The President of Lebanon presented His Holiness Patriarch Kirill with a particle of the cedar of Lebanon found at excavations and dated by the 5th century.

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