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They were joined by Jean Louis Loran, Council of Europe General Director of Political Affairs and Democracy, and other officials of the Council of Europe.

Taking part in the meeting on behalf of the Russian Orthodox Church were hegumen Filaret (Bulekov), representative of the Moscow Patriarchate in Strasbourg; hieromonk Philipp (Ryabykh), DECR deputy chairman; Rev. Sergei Zvonarev, acting DECR secretary for far abroad countries; and V. Kipshidze, a DECR staff member.

A. Alexeyev, permanent representative of the Russian Federation to the Council of Europe also took part in the meeting.

"The Council of Europe is an oldest and respected European institution. Its agenda is very close to the concerns of the Russian Orthodox Church," His Holiness Patriarch Kirill said while greeting the guests, and continued, "The human person is the core of the Church's concern, and the efforts of secular institutions aimed at the betterment of the quality of life and guarantee of human rights allow the Church to maintain close cooperation with them."

His Holiness reminded the participants that the Russian Constitutional Court has recently resolved that no courts could pass death sentence.

'The Church bases its activity on the tradition that did not exclude capital punishment. The Holy Scriptures does not condemn it. However, the Church, at least in Russia, has always appealed the authorities to pardon those sentenced to death. Even in the 18<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> cc. the Church came forward against death penalty. That is why our Church welcomed moratorium on death penalty and later – its abolition.

"Our experience tells us that even the inveterate criminals often change and repents of their

wrongdoings." His Holiness underscored that clergymen and laymen work in Russian prisons extending spiritual care for the prisoners. The abolition of the death penalty would give us an opportunity to work with the most dangerous criminals."

His Holiness said that the Russian Orthodox Church has worked out the Fundamental Teaching of the Russian Orthodox Church on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights approved by the Bishops' Council in June 2008.

"We are aware that the mechanisms of law often could not stop the vices and conflicts in the life of society and people. Many problems are brought about by the abuse of human freedom. Almost all societies are facing the problem of drug addiction, prostitution, collapse of the institute of family, and sexual promiscuity. We are convinced in the necessity to emphasize the connection between freedom and morality."

'If the two notions, such as sin and shame, are no longer present in human consciousness, no factors of law would be able to save humanity from crimes and spiritual crisis. People who have the notion of sin and shame in their hearts may not know certain laws, but they will be law-abiding members of society. Morality is a private affair of people, but society cannot ignore it. as the reasons for crises in human life can be found in morality. That is why we insist on the return of a moral dimension to the doctrine of human rights. As a matter of fact, there is a moral dimension in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but this moral dimension, regrettably, is disappearing, because the modern thought underscores an idea of the relativity of morality."

His Holiness touched upon some topical problems in public morality and gave his assessment to the propagation of sexual promiscuity and homosexuality. He noted that the choice of a certain model of behaviour is a private affair and emphasized that the recognition of this fact does not mean any change in the position of the Church concerning homosexuality. "As we consider it a sin, we are against making homosexual relations equal with natural relations between men and women. We do not want the Council of Europe to become an institution that could say that millions of believers of the Russian Orthodox Church and other religions of Europe and the world are religiously prejudiced people."

The Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church noted that correlation of traditional values and human rights and freedoms demand a thorough study and balanced approach, especially in the decisions taken by international organizations.

His Holiness reminded his high guest of the tragic experience of Russia that has survived the persecution of faith in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and said, "We, as no other nation, know what life in an atheistic state means. Therefore we cry to the Europeans: Do not repeat our awful experience! It was painful to

us to learn of the decision of the Human Rights Court in Strasbourg to ban the crucifixions in the Italian schools."

In conclusion of his speech, His Holiness Patriarch Kirill gave a positive assessment to the present level of relations between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Council of Europe. "Our dialogue has advanced since the opening of our representation in Strasbourg, and we see that the problems of dialogue among different religions and between religion and secular thought have become notable on the Council's agenda," His Holiness noted and added that the Council of Europe was a platform on which the adherents of traditional values and the liberal approach to life should wage a serious dialogue.

The Secretary General of the Council of Europe Thornbjørn Jagland said he was privileged to meet the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church.

I think that your definition of the Council's role is clear and correct, he said and emphasized the importance of dialogue within the Council. He agreed with the necessity to defend human rights.

"I believe that the Church should play an important part in Europe," he continued and added that they understood the position of the Russian Orthodox Church on the upholding of traditional spiritual and moral values. Secretary General Jagland expressed his condolences over the recent assassination of the Orthodox priest in the Moscow region.

In conclusion of the talk the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church wished success to the Secretary General of the Council of Europe and expressed his hope for the development of fruitful dialogue.

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