



## **“Christian holy sites in the Middle East” round table within the framework of the 29th International Educational Readings takes place at the DECR**



On 18<sup>th</sup> May 2021, the Moscow Patriarchate’s Department for External Church Relations hosted a round-table meeting to discuss “Christian Holy Sites in Islamic Regions and International Dialogue” as its topic. The meeting was held within the framework of the 29<sup>th</sup> International Educational Readings “Alexander Nevsky: West and East, People’s Historical Memory,” direction “Tradition. Dialogue. External Relations.”

The meeting was organized by the DECR Secretariat for Interreligious Relations and held under the chairmanship of Archbishop Leonid of Vladikavkaz and Alania, DECR’s deputy chairman. Participating in this event were clergymen and lay representatives of dioceses and organizations of the Russian Orthodox Church both in and outside Russia, as well as orientalist scholars and scholars of religion,

authors and journalists.

Opening the meeting Archbishop Leonid drew attention of the participants to the distressful situation of Christianity in a number of Islamic regions that had been afflicted by local wars and conflicts. Pointing to the importance of the preservation of Christian presence in the cradle of Christianity – the Middle East and North Africa, the chairman of the round table spoke about the efforts undertaken by the Russian Orthodox Church and its partners for the protection of the rights of persecuted Christians and for rendering assistance to the hurt communities. Offering the example of North Caucasus, Archbishop Leonid underscored the importance of interreligious dialogue for ensuring peaceful and equal-right co-existence of Christians and Muslims.

The next speaker was Sergey A. Melnikov, Chairman of the Russian Association for the Protection of Religious Freedom. In his report he presented detailed information about considerable assistance provided to the people of Syria jointly by Russian religious communities and public organizations, with the participation of Russian military.

After that Hegumen Arseny (Sokolov), representative of the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia to the Patriarch of Antioch and All the East, was invited to take the floor. He told the participants about cooperation with the Patriarchate of Antioch and other Christian leaders of Syria and Lebanon in the area of social service and in assisting the restoration of church buildings destroyed by war.

Aleksey V. Sarabyev, a senior researcher of the Russian Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, reported about the current situation of the Christian holy places in Syria.

Another representative of the Institute of Oriental Studies, Yury A. Averyanov, broached the problem of religious syncretism in the Ottoman culture, referring to the dual Christian-Islamic sanctuaries in the Asia Minor territories.

Deputy head of the Department of International Law at the People's Friendship University of Russia, Alexander M. Solntsev, continued discussing the problems of Christianity in Turkey. He analyzed the fact of closing the museum in St. Sophia Cathedral in Istanbul in the light of Turkey's obligations in accordance with international law.

Rev. Dimitry Safonov, DECR secretary for interreligious relations, closing the official presentations, offered the background information of returning the status of working mosque to St. Sophia Cathedral in the context of religious freedom situation in Turkey. He also mentioned other precedents of turning Christian churches, which are historical monuments, into worship places for Muslims and analyzed the situation of the Christian monuments in Turkey in general.

The reports being presented, the guests of the round table meeting took part in a lively discussion. There are plans to publish a book of reports presented at this meeting.

The chairman of the round table appraised the high scholarly level of the reports and thanked the participants for the interesting and informative presentations.

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