DECR chairman speaks in Washington at international summit on religious freedom



On 14th July 2021, with the blessing of His Holiness the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russa Kirill, the chairman of the Department of External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate the metropolitan of Volokolamsk Hilarion gave a presentation at a session of the International summit on religious freedom taking place in Washington, USA.

The gathering's participants were political, public and religious figures fr om all over the world, including representatives of the Local Orthodox Churches, the Roman Catholic Church, the ancient Oriental Churches and various Protestant denominations.

Metropolitan Hilarion was introduced to the event's participants by the president of the Open Doors Christian human rights organization David Curry, who noted the many endeavours undertaken by the

chairman of the DECR in the sphere of defending Christians' freedoms.

Thanking the summit's organizers and the Open Doors leadership for the invitation, metropolitan Hilarion noted: "Today in many countries the freedom of religion is being violated in varying degrees. In many parts of the world Christians are being killed, driven fr om their homes and their churches and holy sites are being desecrated. This situation gives us cause for great concern."

In his presentation the DECR chairman touched upon, in particular, the situation in the Middle East: "The rapid decline of the Christian population is noticeable even in those Middle Eastern countries where Christians and Muslims have lived together for centuries, for example, in Lebanon. In Syria, in those areas which have been seized by extremists, Christians have been subjected to the cruelest repressions. Similar things are happening also in Iraq where for the past eighteen years the number of Christians has been reduced fr om one and a half million to less than five hundred thousand. Almost half the Christian population of Lebanon has been lost," noted the metropolitan.

Metropolitan Hilarion noted that this situation is characteristic for the countries of the Middle East where the centuries-old balance between religious communities has been violated. "In some of these countries the existing regimes were overthrown with the use of force from external powers, after which the establishment of democracy was promised. However, to this day there is no democracy in either Iraq or Libya. This situation is extremely hard for Christians because it was they who became the first victims of political cataclysms organized from without," said the metropolitan.In his speech metropolitan Hilarion noted that the centre of persecution of Christians has gradually shifted to some countries of Africa, in particular, Nigeria and Ethiopia wh ere the adherents of Christianity are being murdered and church buildings are being destroyed. "I would like to express the hope that the religious and human rights organizations represented here today will be able to form a united front for the defence and giving of aid to persecuted Christians of the Middle East and north Africa," said the metropolitan.

During his presentation the chairman of the DECR told the summit participants of the situation in Ukraine wh ere there are two religious groups which both call themselves Orthodox, that is, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and the 'Orthodox Church of Ukraine'. The metropolitan spoke to those present of how the former president of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko tried to unite these two structures into one; however, for canonical sand internal ecclesiastical reasons this proved impossible.

At the same time, noted the metropolitan of Volokolamsk Hilarion, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church is the largest Christian community in Ukraine. "In being linked canonically and spiritually to the Russian Orthodox Church, it is an autonomous and self-governed structure both administratively and financially. Now this Church is in effect being denied her rights. In particular, her church buildings are being forcibly

seized and transferred to another jurisdiction: more than five hundred churches have been seized or illegally reregistered. This often takes place by violent means. In some parts of the country church communities have been obliged to pray in the open air, sometimes knee-deep in snow, while the churches which rightly belong to them have been locked up. These communities have tried appealing to the courts. The courts have come down on their side, yet these decisions are not implemented," said the bishop.

The DECR chairman laid emphasis on those laws which had been adopted under president Poroshenko: "A law was adopted according to which the Ukrainian Orthodox Church was obliged to be renamed as the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine, as though it is a foreign organization representing the Russian Federation, while the Ukrainian Orthodox Church is a huge denomination of Ukraine which includes millions of believers and has more than twelve thousand parishes and more than two hundred and fifty monasteries. There belong to it such large monastic houses as the Monastery of the Caves in Kiev. This Church is made up of Ukrainians – its bishops, clergy and parishioners were born in Ukraine and are Ukrainian citizens. They are patriots of their country."

Metropolitan Hilarion also spoke of another law which proposes the reregistration of religious communities from one jurisdiction to another, noting that the Orthodox communities have no registered community, so in practice any group can come to any town or village to demand a change of jurisdiction of the church building located there.

At the conclusion of his speech the DECR chairman called for the creation of a common front for the defence of believers' rights in all countries of the world wh ere these rights are violated.

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