Consecration of restored Orthodox churches in Arbin and Az-Zabadani



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On January 22, Metropolitan Anthony of Volokolamsk, Chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate Department for External Church Relations, took part in the Sunday Divine Liturgy at the Church of Great Martyr George the Conqueror in Arbin, Syria.

This church was seriously damaged because of military actions near the Syrian capital during an active stage of clashes with militants. Recently the restoration work in it carried out at the expense of the Russian Federation and with the support of the Russian Orthodox Church has been completed.

Before the Liturgy, the restored church was consecrated by His Beatitude Patriarch John X of Great

Antioch and All the East and Metropolitan Anthony of Volokolamsk. His Beatitude's concelebrants included Metropolitan Anthony, hierarchs of the Orthodox Church of Antioch - Metropolitan Ephraim of Aleppo and Alexandretta, Metropolitan Nicholas of Hama, Bishop Moses of Dara, Bishop John of Sergiopolis, Bishop Arsenios of Hierapolis, the clergy of the Patriarchate of Antioch, as well as Metropolitan Anthony's retinue including Archpriest Nikolay Balashov, adviser to Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia; Archpriest Igor Yakimchuk, DECR vice-chairman; and Archimandrite Philipp (Vasiltsev), representative of the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia to the Patriarch of Antioch and All the East.

Worshipping in the sanctuary were Bishop Moses of Larissa and Bishop Roman of Seleucia. Among the worshipers in the church were Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador of Russia in Syria A. V. Yefimov; Commander of the Russian Federation Armed Forces Group in the Syrian Arab Republic Colonel-General A. N. Serdyukov, Executive Director of the Foundation for Support of Christian Culture and Heritage Ye. Skopenko, and representatives of local authorities. The service was held in Arabic and Church Slavonic.

In his Primatial homily, His Beatitude Patriarch John X of Antioch congratulated those present on the restoration and re-consecration of the Church of Great Martyr George the Conqueror in Arbin. 'We know this city very well. Living in it are people of Christian and Moslem communities, and they all deserve to live a life in goodness and dignity and to meet their spiritual needs' His Beatitude stressed, 'Today we thank the Lord for the opportunity to see, after all that happened here, how many buildings were destroyed in Arbin, that we, both Christians and Muslims have assembled in this church where the first Liturgy after the restoration has been celebrated'.

Having noted that the festivity was attended in particular by Chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate Department for External Church Relations Metropolitan Anthony of Volokolamsk and a delegation of the Russian Orthodox Church, as well as the ambassador of the Russian Federation to Syria A. V. Yefimov and Commander of the Russian Federation Armed Forces Group in the Syrian Arab Republic Colonel-General A. N. Serdyukov, His Beatitude emphasized, 'Your presence here affirms once again the unity that ties our Churches, that of Antioch and Russia. We are united. Within this unity, the Russian state and the Russian Orthodox Church have decided to help us in restoring what was ruined by the war. Today we, to the Glory of God, stand again in this church rebuilt by joined efforts'.

Patriarch John stated that the Christians and Muslims residing in Arbin are good people who seek peace. 'What happened in Arbin and adjacent areas and cities were manifestations of terrorism, extremism and hatred towards each other, killings, kidnappings of peaceful citizens and other crimes - all this is very far fr om what local people live by - from seeking the good and the love of God they have. Syria was and is a country culturally important for the whole world, as it is from here that many cultural

and civilizational achievements were disseminated to other states. It will be so hereafter as well. In the past years, children of the Syrian people paid a very high price for the survival of this country.' His Beatitude said and thanked the guests from Russia for participation in the festivity and joined work to restore what was destroyed.

Addressing Metropolitan Anthony, the Primate of the Orthodox Church of Antioch said, 'We give a high value to the help given to Syria and the Orthodox Church of Antioch - the help which, among other things, made it possible for people to return to their homes. Therefore, we pray that you and all those who give help may have strength, good health and prosperity in this life. Today, it is a great joy for us to lift up in this restored church a prayer for the return of peace and well-being to the Syrian land… During the Liturgy today, we prayed for the good health of Russian President Vladimir Putin and for the good health of Syrian President Bashar Assad. We pray for the good health of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill and for the whole Russian Orthodox Church and the all the Russian people'. In memory for the joint prayer, His Beatitude presented Metropolitan Anthony with an icon of the Most Holy Theotokos.

Metropolitan Anthony addressed His Beatitude Patriarch John on behalf of the Russian Orthodox Church's delegation with words of gratitude for the opportunity to take part in the consecration of the revived St. George Church in Arbin and to concelebrate together with His Holiness the Divine Liturgy in this church. 'I believe I will express our shared feelings by saying that today we have an Easter joy in our souls, His Eminence said, 'Easter is a feast at which we celebrate the triumph of life over death and good over evil. Unfortunately, this city and the Syrian land overall are bearing to this day imprints of the terrible war: a great number of destroyed buildings, lost lives of those who fell at the hands of terrorists, broken families, a multitude of refugees who had to leave these places fleeing the war. But today this beautiful church has been reborn for a new life, once being destroyed today it stands before our eyes in such a wonderful beauty'.

As the DECR Chairman noted, the restoration of the church has become a real miracle for which all the participants in the Divine Liturgy thanked God. 'But at the same time, we know that God makes miracles on the earth through the hands of particular people', he continued, 'This miracle has become possible today thanks to the participation of the Russian State, thanks to Russian Federation President Vladimir Putin and the remarkable people who by their efforts hastened the successful completion of this project'. Metropolitan Anthony stressed, 'The church consecrated today has become again a visible symbol of friendship tying our countries, our peoples and our Churches'. The archpastor expressed the wish that the Church of Great Martyr George in Arbin may become a symbol too of reviving Syria - a country returning to peaceful life in which people of different nations and different religions, including Orthodox Christians, the flock of the Patriarchate of Antioch, will live side by side in peace and mutual understanding and feel safe.

Then the high guests were greeted by the rector of the Church of St. George the Conqueror, Archpriest Daniel Hame. He conveyed keepsakes to His Beatitude Patriarch John and Metropolitan Anthony.

The parish children's choir and youth orchestra of Orthodox scouts delivered a performance. The guests were shown the school attached to the church and parish facilities.

On the same day, His Beatitude Patriarch John together with hierarchs of the Orthodox Church of Antioch and Metropolitan Anthony of Volokolamsk with his party, as well as high secular guests arrived in the town of Az-Zabadani wh ere the blessing of the Church of the Dormition of the Most Holy Theotokos took place as it had also been affected by the military actions in Syria and restored with the participation of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Greeting those who assembled in the church, the Primate of the Church of Antioch said that despite the wreckage in Az-Zabadani and traces of the crimes committed by militants who committed there murders and lootings, 'all the local people, both Muslims and Christians are leaving peacefully with each other, while the external forces who wanted to use religion to divide them have miscalculated'.

'Our Motherland is our common cause, we preserve well-being in this country with our own hands and will hand it down to our children', Patriarch John X testified. He also noted that because of the tragedy that befell Syria, many families including residents of Az-Zabadani had to leave native places but 'today family after family, they are coming back here'.

According to His Beatitude, the rebirth of the church has become another ground for people to return to their native town, and though the returning of many to Zabadani and earlier the coming to the restored church seemed to be a dream, now it has become a reality.

'Our brothers in Russia have helped to restore this church', His Beatitude said, 'and now they see this church resembling a beautiful bride thanks to the great efforts made by the Russian State and the Russian Orthodox Church.

Patriarch John emphasized that it is love that unites all the residents of Zabadani regardless of their faith. Another example of this love, according to the Primate of the Church of Antioch, is the presence of representatives of Islam at this event festive for Christians.

His Beatitude also mentioned that, with a blessing of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill, taking part in the consecration of the church is Chairman of the DECR Metropolitan Anthony of Volokolamsk. In addition, present at the festivity is Ambassador of the Russian Federation to the Syrian Arab Republic A. V. Yefimov and Commander of the Russian Federation Armed Forces Group in the Syrian Arab Republic

Colonel-General A. N. Serdyukov.

‘The Russian Orthodox Church and we comprise a one whole’, the Primate of the Church of Antioch stated. He expressed gratitude ‘to the Russian people, Russian State for the aid given not only for restoring the church in Zabadani, but also for many other similar projects’.

Addressing the DECR Chairman, Patriarch John said, ‘You, Your Eminence, have seen with your own eyes and heard with your own ears how the Syrian people live. This is a people of peace, a people of love, gratitude and solidarity, a people utterly far fr om the war sought to impose on them, far from extremism and terrorism, who wish to live in peace and accord. I would like to ask you, Your Dear Eminence Anthony and Dear Ambassador of the Russian Federation A. N. Serdyukov to convey our words of profound gratitude and sincere appreciation to President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, to His Holiness Patriarch Kirill and to all the Russian people’.

In response to the Patriarchal greeting, Metropolitan Anthony said, ‘Just as our hearts were filled with sorrow when we, approaching this town, saw the wounds left by the war, our hearts are rejoicing now when we see the beautiful church revived in Zabadani’. The rebirth of this church has become a fraternal gift of the Russian State and its President as well as all the people of Russia to the fraternal people of Syria, he said.

‘For the two days we are with you, Your Beatitude, we do not cease to speak about how much our peoples have in common. Our peoples are united, among other things, by the ardent love of God and the church which is the house of God’, Metropolitan Anthony continued, ‘How moving it is to see in this town, in which many other things still need to be revived and restored, that the primary ardent wish of local people was to revive the house of God. Among our Russian people, Your Beatitude, it is a convention as well, and when a new village or a new town was founded, the first thing to do was to found a church. All the faithful whatever nation they may belong know how important it is to have God’s blessing accompanying any task. May the rebirth and renovation of this holy church call the blessing of God upon the town and its residents’.

In this church, prayers will be lifted up for the Syrian land and for its people, the DECR Chairman stated noting, ‘But on this day, Your Beatitude, I would like to address you, the clergy who will serve here, all the parishioners and ask you also to keep here praying for Russia, for her authorities, her army which have made a substantive contribution to the maintenance of peace, stability and security in the Syrian land, putting their lives at risk’.

The rector of the church in Zabadani, Archimandrite Ibrahim (Daoud) thanked all those who took part in the preparation and implementation of the project for the restoration of the church - both officials and

ordinary people who took part in the restoration work and created once again the parish community. He also addressed His Beatitude Patriarch John with words of profound gratitude to his paternal love. Greeting Metropolitan Anthony of Volokolamsk, the archimandrite stressed that the Russian Federation and the Russian Orthodox Church ‘could not but saw the ruined church and reached out to us so that we could restore our church and today we can hear again the ringing of its bells’. According to the rector of the parish, in the restored church, prayer will be lifted up, among others, for Russia and the Russian Army.

In memory of the visit to the church, Metropolitan Anthony of Volokolamsk was presented with an archpastoral crozier made by local masters.

Then the participants in the consecration were invited to the parish house wh ere they talked with parishioners and heard a musical performance of youth and children.

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