



Representative of the Russian Orthodox Church in Syria: I hope for the resumption of pilgrimages from Russia



The first Russian church in Lebanon will soon open its doors to the faithful after the completion of restoration. Archimandrite Philip (Vasiltsev), representative of the Patriarch of Moscow and All Rus' to the Patriarch of Antioch, spoke in an interview with RIA Novosti about the life of the Russian community, the shrines of Syria and Lebanon and the prospects for restoring pilgrimage trips from Russia to these ancient countries.

- Very Reverend Father, according to the media, you recently discussed the restoration of the Church of the Annunciation in Lebanon at a meeting with the Russian Ambassador to Lebanon, Alexander Rudakov. Please tell us about that church.

- The Church of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the town of Jal El Dib is located in the

Christian suburb of Beirut - it is the first ever church of the Russian community in Lebanon. Several years ago, it was given to the Russian Orthodox Church by the Metropolis of the Mount Lebanon (Antiochian Patriarchate). Legally it remained in the ownership of the Metropolis, but we are free to build our liturgical and community life in it. Now the reconstruction of the church has been completed.

Meetings with the Russian ambassadors to the Syrian Arab Republic and the Lebanese Republic are regular. I can note with confidence that relations between the Embassies and the Mission of the Russian Orthodox Church are characterised by openness, mutual understanding, trust and a common desire to work together to resolve the issues facing us today.

- How are things now with pilgrimage and tourism by Russians to Syria and Lebanon? What problems are there in this sphere, and how are they being solved?

- It is difficult to answer that question unequivocally. Syria and Lebanon are an integral part of the Holy Land. Events of Biblical history are connected with these countries. In this sense, pilgrimage and tourist routes here will always be of interest to the widest range of people. Another issue is that today, in the broader public consciousness, these countries are not safe for mass travelling. It is absolutely certain that when planning a visit to holy places and world-famous cultural heritage sites in both Syria and Lebanon, security issues must be taken into account. This is particularly true now for visits to holy sites in Syria.

Syria went through a difficult period of war, when the very existence of the state was in question. Thanks to the involvement of the Russian State and the Russian army, the country is emerging from armed conflict, but serious tensions remain in many parts of Syria today. Nevertheless, together with the Embassy of the Russian Federation, we are endeavouring to unite our Russian-speaking Orthodox community, whose members live throughout Syria.

For the past two years we have been implementing a new programme of pilgrimage trips for members of the Russian-speaking Orthodox community in Syria to Damascus to participate in services at the Church of the Holy Martyr Ignatius of Antioch at the Representation of the Russian Orthodox Church. Five such pilgrimage trips to Damascus from Latakia, Tartus, Aleppo, Hama, Homs and other cities in Syria have been organised over the past year and a half.

That is, we are currently organising internal pilgrimage trips to Syria, but we hope for the resumption of pilgrimage trips from Russia in the foreseeable future. Practically, this idea could be implemented with the assistance of the Pilgrimage Centre of the Moscow Patriarchate.

I also hope that the reconstruction of destroyed cities, economies and civilian infrastructure will begin soon. Following this, we can expect the restoration of ancient pilgrimage routes to Syria's world-famous Christian shrines.

- What sites are interesting for pilgrimage in Syria and Lebanon? Where are they, what is their condition, do they need restoration, is the Church involved?

- I remember my first visit to Syria in 2010 with pilgrims from the Church of St Catherine the Great in Rome, where I was ministering at the time. It was right before the armed conflict. We travelled through Syria from Aleppo to Damascus, and the impression of that pilgrimage stayed with me and our Roman parishioners for the rest of our lives.

Syria is an amazing country in its beauty, antiquity and importance for the whole Christian world. Let us remember that the city of Damascus is historically linked to the names of the holy Apostles Peter and Paul. The first bishop of the Church of Antioch was placed by the holy Apostle Peter. It is he who stands at the foundation of the Antiochian Orthodox Church, although usually, when speaking of the Apostle Peter, we are reminded of the Roman Church. On the road from Jerusalem to Damascus, the Saviour appeared to Saul (later Apostle Paul), a persecutor of Christians. On this place, in the village of Tal Kawkab near Damascus, the active Patriarchal Monastery of St Paul the Apostle of Antioch of the Antiochian Orthodox Church is now located.

Every year on the eve of the feast of the memory of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul, who are honoured in the Church of Antioch as its founders, His Beatitude the Antiochian Patriarch of the Great City of Antioch and all the East, in the company of many hierarchs, clergy and in the presence of thousands of pilgrims from Syria, Lebanon and other countries, celebrates Vespers there. It was gratifying to see a larger number of pilgrims this year than in the previous year. I hope that in the near future pilgrims from Russia will also be able to take part in that service. It could be a good option for one of the possible pilgrimage routes - following in the footsteps of the holy Apostles Peter and Paul.

I cannot fail to mention the most ancient Orthodox monasteries in Syria that pilgrims can visit: the Our Lady of Saidnaya Monastery with the miracle-working icon of the Mother of God "Saidnaya"; the rocky Convent of Saint Thecla (in Maaloula), where the language of Christ - Aramaic - is still spoken; the monastery of St. George of Al-Humaira; the Cherubim Monastery.

- What do you see as promising routes for pilgrimage to Lebanon?

- Pilgrimage trips to Lebanon are particularly attractive. In the Holy Gospel we hear: "*Christ came to the countries of Tyre and Sidon*". It was those cities, located now in the south of the Lebanese state, that the Saviour visited during His earthly life. According to an ancient local legend, while visiting the cities of Tyre and Sidon Christ was accompanied by the Blessed Virgin Mary. According to the requirement of the Old Testament law, a believing woman was not allowed to enter a pagan city. Therefore, during the preaching of Her Divine Son in the pagan city of Sidon, the Blessed Virgin stayed waiting for Him in a cave near the village of Maghdouché. This cave has been preserved to this day and is accessible to the public.

In the Holy Scriptures of the Old Testament we repeatedly find references to the cedar of Lebanon, for example, in Psalm 104 (103) of the prophet David: " *The trees of the Lord are full of sap, The cedars of Lebanon which He planted.*" Several such centuries-old cedar groves in the Lebanese mountains have survived to this day.

The capital of Lebanon, Beirut, is considered to be the birthplace of the Holy Great Martyr George the Victorious. According to legend, the place where St George killed the serpent is now the site of the cathedral of the Beirut Metropolitanate of the Antiochian Orthodox Church dedicated to the saint.

On the shores of the Mediterranean Sea lies Byblos, the world's oldest city, one of the centres of Phoenician civilisation. Another ancient city of Lebanon is Baalbek, the hometown of St Barbara, about which Ivan Bunin wrote that it is more impressive than the Egyptian pyramids.

Lebanon is also home to ancient monasteries known throughout the Orthodox world: the monastery of the Dormition of St James of Hamatoura, located on the slopes of the Lebanese mountains, where the relics of its founder, St James, who suffered at the hands of Muslims in the XIII century, rest; a convent in the village of Douma, a convent of Nourieh, a convent of St James the Persian near the city of Tripoli and many others.

This is a very incomplete list of the Christian shrines of the land of Lebanon. I am absolutely convinced that acquaintance with the history of Lebanon, its holy ascetics and popularisation of pilgrimage routes to the ancient Lebanese land is one of the promising directions of our activity.

- Does the Russian Church now participate in humanitarian projects in Syria? And if so, what kind of projects?

- The Russian State, in co-operation with the Russian Orthodox Church, is constantly involved in the process of restoring peaceful life to Syrian citizens. Over the past few years, many humanitarian projects have been carried out, including through the Interreligious Working Group on Assistance to Syria established under the President of Russia.

With the blessing of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Rus' and with the assistance of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, benefactors from Russia are channelling funds for the rebuilding and restoration of churches of the Antiochian Orthodox Church that were damaged both during the military conflict in Syria and as a result of the recent devastating earthquake. In January this year, two such restored churches were solemnly consecrated in the Damascus suburbs of Arbin and Al-Zabadani. We cannot fail to mention the Patriarchal Hospital in Al-Hosn, which is being rebuilt thanks to Russian assistance.

In March 2022, the Centre for Children's Rehabilitation and Prosthetics was opened at the Representative Office of the Russian Orthodox Church, where Syrian children affected by the military conflict are treated.

It is important to note that Russian assistance is not of a one-off, but of a systematic nature and is designed

for years to come. That gives confidence to our brothers from the Antiochian Orthodox Church that the Russian State and the Russian Orthodox Church have a historical responsibility to preserve the Christian presence and heritage in the countries of the Middle East.

Interviewed by Artem Budyonny

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