



presence there, the history of which is exceptionally replete with facts and events. The many written testimonies and cultural artifacts point towards the fact that pilgrimage to the Holy Land was one of the most desired and significant events in the life of God-fearing Russian people.

It was the securing of the opportunity of visiting the Holy Land for a great number of our compatriots that was one of the main goals of establishing more than 140 years ago by Emperor Alexander III the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society. This organization has undoubtedly made a significant contribution to supporting the Palestinian people, primarily in the educational and social spheres. Schools, homes and hospitals were built, which is to say that great charity work was done aimed at supporting the local population.

It is a joy to note that the traditional mutual ties between Russia and the Holy Land continue to develop. I would like to note especially that Russia strives to support these historical ties as well as cultural interaction with the lands and peoples of the Middle East.

Our present meeting is taking place at a very difficult time, although I do not know of any times that were not difficult. A huge number of conflicts are unfolding throughout the world at the present time. A consequence of these conflicts are the new threats to the peaceful coexistence of peoples and countries, friendly and neighbourly relations are being destroyed and the foundation of ties that have been firmly established between various cultures and religions is being put to the test as religions are also drawn into these conflicts.

The events of recent weeks are cause for the greatest concern, for they touch upon the very complex issue of the relationship and interaction between the two most ancient Abrahamic religions of Islam and Judaism. I would like to express my gratitude to you as President of the Russian Federation and to the Russian state leadership for your consistent position of pursuing peace with regard to the problems of regulating the conflict in the Middle East. It is difficult to state what we would now see in the Middle East if it were not for Russia's role in the peace-making process, and only a blind person can fail to see that upon this role there depends in as far as possible stability and tranquility in the Middle East.

I sincerely believe that we – the representatives of Russia's various religions, the secular authorities and society as a whole – have a common interest in interreligious and intercultural dialogue serving the cause of peace and accord. We all desire that relations between the faithful of the traditional religions should be mutually respectful and benevolent. For this we do have the necessary firm foundations in the form of a moral consensus, of a common understanding of what is good and what is evil. This element is of fundamental importance. In a certain sense we have a common system of moral values which are coloured of course by their culture and religion, but in essence the distinction between good and evil in our religions is one and the same.

Religions should never serve the cause of hatred – and we hear calls for this today, unfortunately, from various religious groupings. I believe that all the spiritual leaders present here will agree with my assertion that the notion of hatred of one's fellow human beings cannot in any way be associated with religion. This notion, moreover, in its inner nature undoubtedly comes from the enemy of the human race which is the devil, who hates that which is good.

We, the leaders of Russia's traditional religions, know full well the tragic nature of what is happening at present in the Middle East, and therefore we have no right to allow within our country calls for enmity and the manifestation of hatred on religious grounds. And, glory be to God, with the exception of quite marginal groups, nothing of the sort is happening.

The conflict in the Middle East should not tell upon relations between religious communities, including in

Russia. Our coreligionists see us today sat at the same table together, in dialogue with each other and with the head of state. This is a unique example of how the Russian state interacts with the religions that are to be found on the territory of Russia.

Together we bear testimony to the absence of major differences, including on issues connected with public life. And in addition, as I have already stated, we have much in common on issues of morality, while we believe sin to be the common enemy which vanquishes the human soul.

Of course, secular ethics and even more so secular laws are not guided by the notion of sin, but are guided by the notion of the violation of laws. Sin is the violation of God's law which lies at the heart of human morality, and it is on the foundation of human morality that has been historically formed in many cultures that laws come into being. This is why there of course exists a deep connection between religious values, religious faith and laws.

At present, unfortunately, provocations are happening aimed at worsening the conflict in the Middle East by means of dehumanizing the other side by recourse to the media. In order to remove this threat, we need to throw light upon the situation as broadly as possible and without prejudice. It is evident that Russia's position, in consistently standing for the principle of respect for the legitimate interests of each side and in all ways possible supporting the aspirations of the civilian population of Israel and Palestine in establishing a lasting and just peace, enables the search of ways of putting an end to the armed conflict and restoring dialogue between political opponents.

At the same time, we cannot but state that any strikes at civilian institutions and religious holy sites are worthy of the utmost condemnation. Perhaps this is why religious sites are often subjected to such attacks in order to provoke and harden the hearts of people and thereby worsen the conflict. Unfortunately, in recent days we have heard much in the news to this effect.

The Orthodox Church of Jerusalem, which attends to the spiritual needs of Christians living on both sides of the conflict, holds to a position which is both principled and consistent, which is that civilians should never be the target of military assault and they should be given all help and support. I would like together with you, Your Excellency, as well as with my brothers gathered here today and who are participating in this conversation, to express our joint support for the efforts of the Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem, headed by Patriarch Theophilos, and call upon all not to weaken in their prayer and our further common efforts in establishing a lasting and just peace in the Holy Land. The Holy Land is our common spiritual, cultural and historical treasure, and it is for this reason that peace in the Holy Land is our common responsibility and concern.

I thank you for your attention.”