DECR chairman concelebrates Liturgy with Patriarch of Antioch at Russian Church's Metochion in Damascus

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On 28th January 2024, Metropolitan Anthony of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relation, who is visiting Syria with the blessing of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Rus', took part in the Divine Liturgy at the Church of Hieromartyr Ignatius the God-Bearer – Representation of the Russian Orthodox Church in Damascus. Officiating at the Liturgy was His Beatitude Patriarch John X of Antioch and All the East. Among other concelebrants were Bishop Romanos of Seleucia, chief secretary of the Holy Synod of the Patriarchate of Antioch; Bishop Moussa of Darayya; Bishop John of Sergiopolis; Archimandrite Yakoub (Assaf), a staff member of the Patriarchate of Antioch; Archpriest Nikolai Balashov, advisor to the Patriarch of Moscow and All

Rus'; Archpriest Igor Yakimchuk, DECR deputy chairman; Archimandrite Philip (Vasiltsev), representative of the Patriarch of Moscow and All Rus' to the Patriarch of Antioch and All the East; and Priest Alexander Yershov, assistant to the DECR chairman;

The liturgical prayers were offered in the Arabic, Church Slavonic and Greek languages.

Attending the divine service were Mr Alexander Yefimov, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Russian Federation to the Syrian Arab Republic, as well as representatives of the Centre for Reconciliation of Opposing Sides and Refugee Migration Monitoring in the Syrian Arab Republic, and numerous Russian citizens residing in Syria.

At the end of the Liturgy, His Beatitude Patriarch John of Antioch wholeheartedly greeted Metropolitan Anthony, the delegation of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Ambassador of the Russian Federation.

As His Beatitude said in his homily, the prayers lifted up together by representatives of the Patriarchate of Antioch and the Moscow Patriarchate in the Church of the Holy Hieromartyr Ignatius the God-Bearer served as a visible sign of friendship between the two Orthodox Churches that have been together for centuries, supporting each other as members of one family and like-minded in the matters of the present-day church life. His Beatitude also noted that nowadays people are beset with many problems, including political, worldly ones. Fr om the mass media, they learn of many examples of interpersonal relationships that run counter to the Biblical understanding of family; they see fundamental notions being perverted, virtue condemned and a good person called bad; what is true is regarded as wicked while something bad receives approval. However, the voice of the Gospel will never fade, as Patriarch John emphasized, and Orthodox Christians, including those belonging to the Russian Orthodox Church and the Orthodox Church of Antioch, continue to preach the Gospel of Christ to the world.

"We are aware of the current situation in Russia, we see what is now happening to believers in Ukraine. We feel your pain and our prayers always go out to you," the Primate of the Orthodox Church of Antioch also said and added that the visit of the Moscow Patriarchate's delegation to Syria was a sign of great love of Patriarch Kirill and the plenitude of the Russian Church for the Orthodox Church of Antioch, which is suffering today.

"We love you very much. We are always with you. We are one family and one Church," His Beatitude Patriarch John added.

Metropolitan Anthony of Volokolamsk cordially thanked His Beatitude for his kind words and his blessing to visit the ancient Church of Antioch wh ere the disciples of Christ had been called Christians

for the first time. He conveyed to Patriarch John brotherly regards, kindest wishes and assurances of unwavering support from His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Rus'. The DECR chairman also thanked the Primate of the Church of Antioch for everything he did to uphold the unity of worldwide Orthodoxy, which, regrettably, is currently under threat. "Devout children of the Russian Orthodox Church hearken to your powerful and wise words in support of ecclesiastical unity and of our Church's faithful who, as you have mentioned, are being subjected to the most severe persecution in Ukraine," Metropolitan Anthony said, in particular, "It was hard to imagine that time would come again when bishops, priests and laypeople would be imprisoned, churches would be destroyed, and schismatics would seize church buildings, forcing local communities out. Your words, along with the statements of the Holy Synod of the Church of Antioch and many of its hierarchs fortify and encourage our Church's flock, especially those undergoing terrible persecutions."

His Beatitude Patriarch John X of Antioch also expressed gratitude to Archimandrite Philip (Vasiltsev) and Ambassador Alexander Yefimov. "It is to us that the following verse of the Holy Scripture refers: Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity! (Ps 133:1)," he said.

On behalf of the Centre for Reconciliation of Opposing Sides and Refugee Migration Monitoring in the Syrian Arab Republic, Rear-Admiral Vadim Kulit handed over to Patriarch John of Antioch a certificate ensuring that foodstuffs are to be provided to communities of the Orthodox Church of Antioch.

A reception in honour of the high guests was given by the Representation of the Russian Orthodox Church in Damascus. Archimandrite Philip (Vasiltsev) presented to His Beatitude Patriarch John prayer beads made of the Russian Baltic amber, and to Metropolitan Anthony – an icon of the Mother of God painted by one of the Metochion's female parishioners.

The DECR chairman thanked Archimandrite Philip for his pastoral and diplomatic work and presented him with a pectoral cross with decorations.

After the reception, an agreement was signed between the Children's Rehabilitation and Prosthetics Centre operating at the Russian Orthodox Church's Metochion in Damascus and the Russian Orthodox Church. According to the agreement, the Centre may continue to use the Metochion premises and medical equipment on gratuitous basis.

That same day later, the delegation of the Russian Orthodox Church accompanied by Bishop Romanos of Seleucia visited the Patriarchal Convent of Our Lady of Saidnaya and venerated its shrines, including the miracle-working Saidnaya Icon of the Mother of God. Its abbess, Mother Febronia, welcomed Metropolitan Anthony and his companions to the convent. She gave them an overview of the history of the abode founded in the 6th century by Emperor Justinian and told them about the hardships that had

befallen its nuns a short time ago, during the hostilities in Syria. An exchange of gifts took place. After that, the guests were offered a repast and visited the convent’s museum of antiquities.

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