

Joint Declaration of Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia

The situation of Christians in the Middle East, religious freedom and interreligious dialogue at the heart of the Declaration

HRWF (15.02.2016) - On the occasion of their meeting in Havana (Cuba) on 12th February, Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia released a Joint Declaration in which a substantial part was devoted to the situation of Christians in the Middle East, religious freedom and interreligious dialogue:

"Our gaze must firstly turn to those regions of the world where Christians are victims of persecution. In many countries of the Middle East and North Africa whole families, villages and cities of our brothers and sisters in Christ are being completely exterminated. Their churches are being barbarously ravaged and looted, their sacred objects profaned, their monuments destroyed. It is with pain that we call to mind the situation in Syria, Iraq and other countries of the Middle East, and the massive exodus of Christians from the land in which our faith was first disseminated and in which they have lived since the time of the Apostles, together with other religious communities.

We call upon the international community to act urgently in order to prevent the further expulsion of Christians from the Middle East. In raising our voice in defence of persecuted Christians, we wish to express our compassion for the suffering experienced by the faithful of other religious traditions who have also become victims of civil war, chaos and terrorist violence.

Thousands of victims have already been claimed in the violence in Syria and Iraq, which has left many other millions without a home or means of sustenance. We urge the international community to seek an end to the violence and terrorism and, at the same time, to contribute through dialogue to a swift return to civil peace. Large-scale humanitarian aid must be assured to the afflicted populations and to the many refugees seeking safety in neighbouring lands.

We call upon all those whose influence can be brought to bear upon the destiny of those kidnapped, including the Metropolitans of Aleppo, Paul and John Ibrahim, who were taken in April 2013, to make every effort to ensure their prompt liberation.

We lift our prayers to Christ, the Saviour of the world, asking for the return of peace in the Middle East, "the fruit of justice" (Is 32:17), so that fraternal co-existence among the various populations, Churches and religions may be strengthened, enabling refugees to return to their homes, wounds to be healed, and the souls of the slain innocent to rest in peace.

We address, in a fervent appeal, all the parts that may be involved in the conflicts to demonstrate good will and to take part in the negotiating table. At the same time, the international community must undertake every possible effort to end terrorism through common, joint and coordinated action. We call on all the countries involved in the struggle against terrorism to responsible and prudent action. We exhort all Christians and all believers of God to pray fervently to the providential Creator of the world to protect His creation from destruction and not permit a new world war. In order to ensure a solid and enduring peace, specific efforts must be undertaken to rediscover the common values uniting us, based on the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We bow before the martyrdom of those who, at the cost of their own lives, have given witness to the truth of the Gospel, preferring death to the denial of Christ. We believe that these martyrs of our times, who belong to various Churches but who are united by

their shared suffering, are a pledge of the unity of Christians. It is to you who suffer for Christ's sake that the word of the Apostle is directed: "Beloved ... rejoice to the extent that you share in the sufferings of Christ, so that when his glory is revealed you may also rejoice exultantly" (1 Pet 4:12-13).

Interreligious dialogue is indispensable in our disturbing times. Differences in the understanding of religious truths must not impede people of different faiths to live in peace and harmony. In our current context, religious leaders have the particular responsibility to educate their faithful in a spirit which is respectful of the convictions of those belonging to other religious traditions. Attempts to justify criminal acts with religious slogans are altogether unacceptable. No crime may be committed in God's name, "since God is not the God of disorder but of peace" (1 Cor 14:33).

In affirming the foremost value of religious freedom, we give thanks to God for the current unprecedented renewal of the Christian faith in Russia, as well as in many other countries of Eastern Europe, formerly dominated for decades by atheist regimes. Today, the chains of militant atheism have been broken and in many places Christians can now freely confess their faith. Thousands of new churches have been built over the last quarter of a century, as well as hundreds of monasteries and theological institutions. Christian communities undertake notable works in the fields of charitable aid and social development, providing diversified forms of assistance to the needy. Orthodox and Catholics often work side by side. Giving witness to the values of the Gospel they attest to the existence of the shared spiritual foundations of human co-existence.

At the same time, we are concerned about the situation in many countries in which Christians are increasingly confronted by restrictions to religious freedom, to the right to witness to one's convictions and to live in conformity with them. In particular, we observe that the transformation of some countries into secularized societies, estranged from all reference to God and to His truth, constitutes a grave threat to religious freedom. It is a source of concern for us that there is a current curtailment of the rights of Christians, if not their outright discrimination, when certain political forces, guided by an often very aggressive secularist ideology, seek to relegate them to the margins of public life."

(...)

Francis

Bishop of Rome
Pope of the Catholic Church

Kirill

Patriarch of Moscow
and all Russia

HRWF Footnote:

See the Resolution adopted by the Council of Europe Assembly on 27 January 2016:
<http://bit.ly/20x9DV5>

See the Resolution adopted by the European Parliament on 4 February 2016
<http://bit.ly/1U2JXhw>