



Metropolitan Hilarion answers questions from Kommersant daily

In a talk to a correspondent of the daily, the chairman of the Department for External Church Relations spoke, among other things, about the persecution of Christians in various regions of the world.

Q. Recently representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church have regularly made statements about signs of Christianophobia emerging in the Middle East. Is this problem a real threat?

A. Two weeks ago in Hungary I attended an international interreligious conference on Christian-Jewish-Muslim dialogue. I remember the remarks made by Massimo Introvigne, a well-known Italian sociologist and scholar of religion and OSCE representative. He cited statistics based on a thorough research into the problem, saying, 'One Christian dies for the faith every five minutes in the world'. He also reported that annually 105 thousand Christians die a violent death during interreligious conflicts.

In October 2010, the European Union Commission of Bishops' Conferences made a conclusion that 'at least 75 percent of all acts of religious persecution in the world were directed at Christians. According to experts, annually about 170 thousand Christians suffer for their faith.

In addition, early this year the Open Doors human rights charitable organization, which has been engaged in monitoring the situation of Christians in the world since 1978, published its statistics showing that some 100 million Christians are subjected to persecution today in various countries. So, we have to acknowledge the obvious fact that Christians are the most persecuted religious community in the world. Some even compare this situation to the persecution that took place in the first three centuries of Christianity.

Q. Why have Christians proved to be vulnerable to persecution and what are its consequences?

A. Countries where Christians are a minority are lacking a really effective system of their protection.

Events happening today in Egypt are only a part of a more global process affecting the life of Christians in a number of countries. If the authorities in the Middle East states do not take special measures to protect Christians, their exodus from these countries will continue.

Q. In what countries other than Egypt the situation of Christians causes concern?

A. Reports about persecution against Christians are coming from Sudan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq and several countries in South-East Asia. The notorious law 'On Blasphemy' enforced in Pakistan is used not only to defend the sacred symbols and names of Islam but also to persecute Christians. I will remind you that about a million and a half Christians used to live in Iraq until 2003. Now they are no more than a half of that number, while those who stayed fear for their life every day.

Q. How can persecuted Christians be protected against Christianophobia?

A. The intensified persecution of Christians has already compelled international organizations to make a number of appropriate statements. The European Parliament adopted on January 20 a resolution 'On the Situation of Christians in the Context of Religious Freedom'. A similar resolution was adopted by the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly. However, we have to take concrete and effective actions as well. It is necessary to organize urgently a system for protecting Christians against persecution. In the first place, it is necessary to set up information structures to monitor crimes committed on the grounds of religious hatred. Each case of violence and persecution against Christians should become a case for trial by both national and international judicial bodies.

Very important today is interreligious solidarity, for extremism and radicalism present a threat to all the traditional religions which seek a peaceful coexistence among people. It is also important that the phenomenon of persecution against Christians should not be hushed up but discussed actively and that representatives of traditional religions make joint efforts to improve the situation of Christians in the world. It is necessary that governmental and international organizations should join these efforts.

I believe the mechanism for protecting Christians can be as follows: economic and other aid in exchange for guarantees of the rights of religious minorities. If this policy is carried out efficiently we may change the situation for the better and stop the wave of persecution against Christians that has engulfed various countries today.
