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Church, Society and the Peace of Christ

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Honoured participants in this conference, dear brothers and sisters!

Allow me to extend a warm welcome to you, the leaders and representatives of churches in the countries of the CIS and the Baltic States and also to guest representatives of other religions, who have come to our Danilov Monastery in order to revive under new conditions that cooperation between us which has stood the test of time and to resolve together the many problems of modern-day life.

I believe that with the help of God this conference will take place in that atmosphere of brotherly understanding which has always existed amongst us, and that it will further enrich us by the experience of working together in our peacemaking service to society, to which we are called by our Lord and Saviour (Matthew 5:9).

While discussing this important conference at sessions of the preparatory committee, we shared our deep anxiety about the tensions in international relationships in particular which are clearly expressed in many forms of violence, intolerance and mutual hostility. The lives and dignity of millions are under threat, including those of women, children and old people. Innocent blood is flowing in many places. Tens of thousands of families are destitute and have been forced to abandon their homes. It is with sorrow that we acknowledge that many acts of violence have been committed by those who consider themselves Christians or followers of other religions. In such people religious convictions have given way to the temptation to solve their problems by means of violence. In real life many have proved unable to direct their steps towards the path of peace (Luke 1:79).

Today people of many nationalities from different regions of the former Soviet Union are asking themselves how all this could have happened, what has caused the disagreements between different regions, what the consequences of these international conflicts might be and how we can extricate ourselves from this situation. Our people once heard about attacks on peaceful villages and towns, the kidnapping of hostages, refugees, sabotage, terrorism and blockades from news summaries as events that happened in faraway places, but suddenly they know it all from personal experience. War has become part of our everyday life, a part of the political struggle, a means of gaining and consolidating power. It has even, though it is terrible to say this, become a profitable business. We have begun to live according to the law of war and this is the first and most terrible fruit to grow out of the bitter seeds of totalitarianism.

Many of today's problems are, without a doubt, our inheritance from the previous era. The so-called 'nationalities policy' meant in practice the suppression of national feelings and the attempt to dissolve national traditions in the melting pot to create the

'new' Soviet Man, especially if these traditions had anything to do with religion. On the other hand, after the October Revolution the former Russian Empire was divided into territories based on national identity. In this process some nations came to be associated with certain territories despite the fact that in some cases historical borders to these territories simply did not exist and in other cases the borders had frequently been altered in the past, often by violence. A number of nations turned out not to have a right to 'their own territory' at all. Every nation is proud of that period in its history when it was at the heyday of its power, and therefore a conflict of interests between nations, encouraged by a nationalist interpretation of history, was inevitable.

Many leaders of socio-political movements in the former USSR saw in the concept of the nation precisely what was needed to solve every problem, but they failed to realise that the creation of a nation is a long-drawn-out process of rebirth and education. If it is to be a creative power rather than a mere elemental force, a nation has to be made fruitful from On High. It is only by espousing the Universal, the Divine, that a nation can divest itself of egoism and cease to be a source of enmity and conflict. Unfortunately, with the collapse of totalitarianism and the discovery of basic rights and freedoms, the religious and national rebirths took place separately, no doubt as a result of 70 years of state atheism. And even where religion and nationalism are united we often see the religious principle dependent on the national principle and subordinate to it.

The church is called on to nurture religious-national selfconsciousness in such a way that we do not lose our sense of responsibility for establishing the moral ideals of Christianity in the reality of everyday life. If we make nationalism the highest principle we perpetuate and legitimise that very struggle which is tearing humanity apart.

A conflict of interests between two nations with a strong sense of national identity inevitably leads to a clash if their intentions are blinded by nationalistic ideas. The intensity of the many conflicts which characterise the post-Soviet era bears witness to the destruction of that area of culture in which the national principle is a very important, but not the only, piece of the mosaic; there is not enough space for the religious principle, which is capable of overcoming national egoism and elevating the national to the universal.

Allow me to voice my deep conviction that there is no single nation on the territory of the former USSR which needs to exercise violence towards others in order to overcome the current crisis. What we see is something different, however, and it is obvious that the heightened tension between people of different nations, traditions and cultures today is an unfortunate natural reaction to the national policy of the previous regime. The pendulum has swung from the suppression of national feelings to a hypertrophied emphasis on national identity and aggressive, unrestrained efforts to defend the interests of one nation by trampling on the interests of another. Many have begun to think exclusively in terms of returning to the times when their nation occupied the maximum territory, forgetting that in reality the world has changed. There is at the moment a euphoria of national pride, but it must not be forgotten that pride, in the words of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, 'grows on the heart like fat on a pig'. Our hearts have indeed become hardened towards any who are different from us. In some countries people who do not belong to the indigenous nation are deprived of citizens' rights, in others they are treated by the law enforcement agencies as if they were notorious criminals, in others they are deprived of work and so on. What is particularly terrible is that the moral standards of society are changing. Not long ago to insult someone simply because he or she was Russian, Caucasian, Jewish or

Ukrainian was considered to be antisocial and was condemned by society, but now it is accepted as something both normal and natural, and even inevitable.

The legacy of the past burdens us with political, economic and social problems. The absence of a culture of coexistence and cooperation amongst people with different views on how to build up state and society – the consequence of decades without freedom – has led to all kinds of political confrontations, several of which, as was the case in Russia, have involved bloodshed. The sudden removal of all restrictions on free social development, along with a lack of experience of civilised political activity, has led to attempts by various forces to solve all our problems at one blow by forcing our people once again to accept this or that political course as unconditionally and indisputably correct. This mistake by maximalist and militant politicians has led to the radicalisation of social processes, and the consequences of this will continue to affect us for a long time.

In the economic sphere, the collapse of the old system took place in the absence of mechanisms for the proper regulation of market relations. This brought chaos and criminalisation to the economy, and this in its turn has led to a catastrophic fall in the standard of living of millions of people, and, as a consequence, to huge social tension. Every moment national discontent threatens to explode and disturb social peace. It is particularly distressing to see that the victims of this transition from a centralised economy to a market economy are above all elderly people who have lost all that they acquired by honest labour, as well as those who for reasons beyond their control cannot earn enough to live on.

There is no shortage of all kinds of analyses of what has happened and is continuing to happen to all of us. Christians also have the right to their own analysis of history and at the centre of this analysis must be the acknowledgement and confession of sin. The Lord punishes us for our sins as He punished ancient Israel. The similarities here are obvious. We have had our 70-year Babylonian captivity and today we are travelling along a difficult road, returning to our father's house. I believe that the Merciful One, who in ancient days did not carry out his terrible promise to the Israelites, recorded in Chapter 25 of the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah, will not reject us either, but will give us the hope of peace, purification and spiritual renewal.

'Weep, shepherds and groan.' We, the spiritual leaders of the flock of Christ, must grieve more than any others over the spiritual condition of the people of God entrusted to our care. We should be ashamed that we have not done enough to overcome the baneful legacy of the recent past in order to prevent divisions, enmity and the spilling of blood. Today the Lord is again calling us to serve those who are divided by hatred. We must labour to gather the fragments of the broken hearts of our spiritual children, who are darkened by sin and raising their hands against one another. We must pray hard and work selflessly in order that we will not fail on the day of the Last Judgment.

Those who are devoted to God may become a living bridge between those brothers and sisters divided by war or enmity. This does not just happen by chance, for the life of a Christian, like that of every deeply religious person, is directed not towards the earthly, but towards the heavenly, not towards immediate gain, but towards the final fulfilment of his or her life, before which all temporary aims and interests grow dim. Indeed, people who are aiming for heaven enjoy the particular confidence of those who are drowning in the quagmire of enmity, precisely because they are not in the grip of self-interest and are ready to deny their own good for the sake of the good of the neighbour and in service to the highest, spiritual good. I would go so far as to assert that the best Christian

policy is the policy of humility and self-sacrifice even in the face of an enemy, in obedience to the Gospel's command to 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you' (Matthew 5:44). Through prayer and faith it is possible to become a stronghold of peace in the midst of enmity, even if those close to us in the flesh are involved. This possibility is given to us by God in the greatness of his mercy and it is our religious duty to take hold of this opportunity.

Knowing that this is so, the Russian Orthodox Church has made a series of attempts in recent years to establish peace amongst those divided by the barricades of enmity. I would be the first to admit that the peacemaking initiatives undertaken by our Church have not always achieved the best result that might have been expected. However, let nobody draw the false conclusion that there is no point in Christians involving themselves in peacemaking at all. The main reason for a Christian to attempt to make peace between warring factions is not a thirst for glory or power, nor even a desire for political success. It is the call of God. It is the awareness of the impossibility of being reconciled to sin and especially to that most heinous sin, murder. It is the striving to serve the Good even when the only hope is a Divine miracle, for as followers of Christ we believe that the Lord can indeed help us by miracles. Christians must extend the hand of peace to those at war, asking nothing for themselves. That gift of reconciliation, which comes not from themselves but from God, they must give away freely to others (Matthew 10:8).

It was exactly in this spirit that the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church undertook its well-known peacemaking mission during the civil conflict in Russia in September and October of 1993. It can only be a matter of regret that the negotiating process, which had almost led to the resolution of that dangerous armed confrontation, foundered in a welter of passion and violence. However, I am convinced that the talks held in the Danilov Monastery did have a positive effect. They helped to ensure that several crises in the course of the conflict were resolved without bloodshed; they warned people off thoughtless action; and, most importantly of all, they initiated what might be called our country's first experience of open, sincere and mutually respectful dialogue between opposing sides at a crucial moment in the civil conflict.

A special characteristic of the Moscow Patriarchate is that it is a spiritual organism, uniting the dioceses of the Russian Orthodox Church in Russia with those in a number of other countries in the Near Abroad and further afield which have their own independent internal administrative structures, such as the churches in Belarus, Latvia, Moldova, Ukraine and Estonia. Structured in this way the Patriarchate places a huge responsibility on its leadership. Judge for yourselves: for example, in the course of the conflict in Moldova members of our Church found themselves on both sides of the front. It is not a miracle that after a bitter and bloody war the Orthodox Church in Moldova was not divided, and that believers remained in canonical unity despite the fact that they were living on both sides of the Dnestr? His Holiness Patriarch Aleksii II, I believe, played an important role in working for this outcome. His wise move at the height of the crisis in Moldova was to write to both parties expressing his sorrow at the sacrifices being made and at the same time warning against fratricide. His Holiness the Patriarch and the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church have spoken out in the same way about all the bloody conflicts taking place on the territory of the CIS, condemning the violence, bemoaning the sacrifices on the part of all those involved, and calling on the leaders of the warring factions to resolve their

differences at the negotiating table.

Our Church is working and praying to encourage the nations which make up its historical flock, as well as all the other nations of the CIS and the Baltic States, to stop fighting one another, to put a stop to the process of disintegration of those traditional economic, cultural and spiritual ties which bind them together, and to understand at last that in future they must work together in a free and equal partnership. As a Russian I particularly want to affirm that the Church is calling on the Russian people, whose destiny is at a crossroads and on whom the future of the whole region largely depends, to collaborate in peace and harmony with all the peoples of the CIS and the Baltic States. I am convinced that the Orthodox pastors of Russia will succeed in resurrecting in our nation our primordial striving to work for the good of everyone near and far with openness and goodwill. The future will be very hard for us Russians if we do not pay attention to the words of that genius and expert on the Russian soul Fedor Mikhailovich Dostoyevsky:

It is clear that a Russian has to be both European and universal. To become a genuine Russian, to become fully Russian, perhaps simply means becoming the brother of everyone, a 'universal man', if you like ... Our domain is the whole world, won not by the sword but by the power of brotherhood and of our brotherly desire that all peoples should be united.

While on the subject of the Church's work for peace in the various 'hot spots' in the countries of the CIS, I would like to make special mention of the everyday church work of those clergy and lay people who are serving God in areas of conflict. Many of these labourers for the church are with us here today. I bow humbly before your selflessness. Disregarding danger and deprivation, you bring the Word of the God of peace and the love of Christ to the people and by your own good example you enlighten and pacify those around you.

At the same time, however, we must not forget that many members of the church on earth have hearts darkened by the fatal influence of worldly forces and are not rooted deeply enough in the peace of Christ. Not a few of us are guilty of compromise by giving in to sinful aspirations. 'What causes wars, and what causes fighting among you?' writes the holy apostle James. 'You desire and do not have' (James 4: 1-3). In the words of Ignati Bryanchaninov, 'the commandment of love is new, but our hearts are ancient.' In order that contemporary Christians might be free from possession by the spirit of 'this age', and that the peace in their souls might effectively withstand human enmity, it is essential that we spiritual leaders work as hard as we can for the enlightenment and spiritual education of the brothers and sisters in our care. We must also remember that our best witness to peace should be harmony amongst us on the whole question of the mutual relationship between Christian brotherhood and secular society, which is divided by enmity.

In this context our conference here is especially important: it demonstrates our common desire to work together to help the peoples of our various countries. It is clear that Christian service for reconciliation in the countries of the CIS and the Baltic States will be fully effective only if the churches and religious groups in our countries find ways of helping one another and coordinating their peace-making activities. It has become a matter of vital concern that Christians of different denominations in the post-Soviet region should work well together today.

There has been a certain weakening of the links between us, partly for political reasons and partly as a side-effect of the tidal wave of missionary activity of all kinds which has swept over our countries. It seems to me that this weakening of our mutual links has had no positive consequences. The mutual estrangement of brothers and sisters in Christ has caused much grief, it has given rise to misunderstandings and it has deprived us of the chance openly and sincerely to discuss and resolve our disputes. We could have done so much good for people if we had not forgotten the importance of working together!

In reminding you of all this I want to share with you my conviction that interdenominational cooperation in service to society by Christians in the countries of the CIS and the Baltic States is both possible and useful. The work done by the preparatory committee for this conference has already shown that there are practically no obstacles to our keeping up relationships with one another and working together. We are probably not going to resolve our theological and doctrinal differences today, but these differences certainly do not prevent us from helping each other in our common concern for our neighbours. Even the problems which in this time of troubles are inevitably arising between denominations can be resolved only by means of direct brotherly conversations in a spirit of justice and harmony.

Let me go further. I believe the time has come for us to consider creating a permanent forum of the Christian churches and religious groups in our region to coordinate peacemaking and other social initiatives and to solve problems arising between denominations. When you make your presentations I would be very grateful if you would comment on this proposal. I would also like to suggest that the time has come to think about the revival of interreligious cooperation. The last valuable experience of this kind was the meeting of leaders and representatives of churches and religious organisations in the Soviet Union on 7 December 1989 to discuss relations between the nationalities. The concluding document said that

We call upon believing citizens to render help and support to all people in need regardless of their nationality. The command of religion to show active love and compassion to all obliges us to carry our charitable and social work through to an effective conclusion.

Adherence to a church or a religious group shows up chauvinism and national exclusiveness for what it is – a sin which contradicts everything that constitutes the dignity of a nation. Arrogance and scorn towards other nations and cultures have no place here. Love for one's own nation must not be blind, preventing one from learning the lessons of history and from accepting the values and experiences of other nations.

I take it that we would all still be able to give our assent to these words today.

In conclusion I would like to express my fervent hope that our collaboration will inaugurate a new phase in fraternal Christian work in the countries of the CIS and the Baltic States for the establishment of peace and harmony amongst our peoples. I believe that the Lord will be with us on this path, strengthening us and helping us in our human weakness to overcome the terrible forces of enmity, hatred, destruction and death. I believe that we will prove ourselves worthy of our calling to be peacemakers, preserving 'the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace' (Ephesians 4:3).