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CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN CHURCHES

Address of His Grace Dr. Irinej, Bishop of Novi Sad and Backa at the plenary session of CEC in Novi Sad, June 2, 2018

Your Holiness,
Your Eminences,
Most Reverend Metropolitans, Archbishops, and Yours Graces Bishops,
Your Excellences,
Very reverend and reverend Fathers,
Highly respected officers and representatives of the Conference of European Churches,
Dear friends and guests, brothers and sisters,

It is my great honour and pleasure to welcome all of you once again in Serbia and Novi Sad, the seat of the Orthodox Diocese of Backa.

The complexity of the historical moment that we meet in binds us, the representatives of Christian Churches of the "Old Continent", to strive to seriously and responsibly consider – through a fraternal dialogue – the central topic of our Assembly, the very words of Christ: *You shall be my witnesses* (Acts 1: 8).

It seems that today, as rarely ever in history, the witness of Christ is crucified on the Cross of temptation, between the powers that largely model our historical reality and the graces of God which permeate our history with the reality of the Kingdom of God. We, the Christians of today – like every other people – are confronted with apocalyptic restlessness: "Fighting without and fear within" (II Cor. 7: 5). On television and computer screens, where constant reality-programs play, horrible, apocalyptic scenes are being presented: a heavy truck ploughs into dozens of innocent people at a Christmas fair and kills them; father and mother strap explosive belts around their seven and nine years old daughters and send them into death; on a sunny coast of the Mediterranean, which became a mass grave to refugees, one child's dead body was found; millions of people from the East and the South are rushing to the Western Europe, fleeing from the countries completely devastated by war, in which the West is not innocent, or from hunger and poverty. In Serbia and the surrounding countries, the number of cancer patients has multiplied, which is a direct consequence of bombardment with depleted uranium and of the destruction of chemical factories and plants. A few days ago, armed soldiers killed dozens, and hundreds of protesters were wounded. And so on, and so on...

The world seems to have come to a point where there is no return. And Christians, in fact all people, cry for peace. No wonder that contemporary Christians, like the Holy Apostles prior to the Ascension of the Lord, hoping for the peace of the Lord and desiring it, are almost asking the question: "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1: 6) .

We, who have gathered here in the name of Christ, the representatives of the European Churches, should not forget at any moment that Europe and the Middle East are communicating vessels and that in the Middle East all the peoples, and especially Christian communities, experience unprecedented martyrdom. There, where *Christianity* came into existence, where Christ was born, crucified and resurrected, Christians disappear from the face of the earth. Because of all this, I am especially happy that some Church Primates and representatives of the ancient Oriental Churches are here with us.

A similar situation is to be found here in Europe, especially in the southern part of Serbia, which is called Kosovo and Metochia. It is a relatively small territory, but it contains about one thousand and five hundred monasteries, churches and other monuments of Christian culture, as well as the historical see of the Serbian Archbishops and later Patriarchs. Many of these sacred sites have been either completely destroyed or damaged

and desecrated, and some, although under the protection of UNESCO as exceptionally important cultural monuments, are in a constant danger, such as the Decani monastery, surrounded by hard to explain passive behaviour of Euro-American forces whose duty is to provide peace and life for all. Majority of the Serbian Orthodox population was expelled, many were killed, the property of the expelled was usurped and they were via *facti* deprived of the right to return. Even many cemeteries have been demolished, so that when the expelled and displaced people come to offer prayers to God on the graves of their ancestors and relatives for the repose of their souls, they are exposed to brutal attacks by the local Albanians, their former neighbours. In a nutshell: the tragic destiny of Cyprus has been repeated.

All the true values embedded in the foundations of the modern European civilization have come from the Middle East, from the cradle of Christianity, and the beginnings of European culture and civilization are inextricably linked to the area that is today, often pejoratively, called the Balkans.

Allow me here to engage in a little digression that I personally consider to be useful. In today's diplomatic and media phraseology the term *balkanization* is used as an extremely negative term, synonymous with permanent conflicts and chaos, so that sometimes we read or hear about the danger of balkanization of certain African and Asian regions (!). I ask and wonder: how many educated Europeans today know that the oldest European civilization was born in the Balkans, and that it happened –which is hard to believe!– on the very banks of the Danube, the European “river of life”, on the territory of today's Serbia and Romania? The most important traces of this proto-European civilization, almost eight thousand years old, are to be found on the Serbian coast of the Danube (*Lepenski vir* and *Vinča*). I ask and wonder: how many educated Europeans today know that the ancient Greeks civilized the entire so-called Balkan Peninsula, which is why today in the Museum of Vojvodina in Novi Sad we have a rich collection of the antique Greek heritage. I ask and wonder: how many educated Europeans today know that the Balkan peninsula, whose central part is occupied by today's Serbia, was also the central part of the Roman Empire, between its Western provinces (Italy, Gaul, Germany, Britain...) and Eastern provinces (Asia Minor, Syria, Palestine, Egypt...)? In that context, how many educated Europeans today know that eighteen Roman emperors, starting with Constantine the Great, were born on the soil of today's Serbia, and that, after Italy, Serbia is the second-largest home to so many monuments of Roman culture and civilization? I mention here only the locality of Felix Romuliana, as one of many.

Why do I mention this? Certainly not because I would like to replace negative statements about the so-called Balkans with superlatives, but to emphasize that our common prayerful thinking about the future of Europe should always refer to Europe as a whole, including the territory of Russia, and not to one of its parts. Likewise, the sacred duty of testifying Christ as the Truth and Life and of testifying His Gospel as Good News about the salvation of all people and all the creation is neither the privilege nor the monopoly of the Orthodox or Roman Catholic Churches, but the vocation and joint responsibility of all the Churches and Christian communities, as well as of every Christian individually.

The cause of moral decadence and political crisis in modern Europe lies, first of all, in the deformation and destruction of the Christian way of life, in the rejection of Christian values and norms, in the silent expulsion of Christianity from public life and in its gradual reduction to a “private affair” and “individual choice”. All these processes take place in the name of “human rights”, which are, of course, taken out from their original Christian context, and they take place formally in a democratic way, but sometimes indirectly by violent endangerment of the Christian identity and religious conscience of many Europeans. New models and contents of life have been imposed not only through media and propaganda, but also through political decisions and legislative solutions; a new value system, almost completely emancipated from Christian ethics, a new social structure, a secular religion of Mammon, new forms of human communities founded on foreign standards and rules or even opposing Christian understanding of dignity of the personality and the sense of the community... There is an obvious tendency to obscure the sanctity of marriage and family; the natural gender affiliation is being relativized, bold operations in genetic being of man are being undertaken, bioethical frontiers are ignored... I could go on for a long time, but this is enough.

These are, therefore, the circumstances in which we Christians of Europe should witness to Christ, the Crucified and the Resurrected “for the life of the world”. Because of all this, I repeat, a witness of Christ today, as rarely ever earlier in history, is crucified between the actual historical reality and the reality of the Kingdom of God that came “in power”, comes and will come in full. I am pretty certain that Europe will lose its existing identity if the process of radical secularization continues, which, I would say, is only a euphemism for dechristianization. In that case, Europe will be only a geographical term, and most likely after some time it will acquire a new identity, based perhaps on Islam or on some hybrid, syncretistic model of pseudo-religion inspired by New Age and tailored to the concept of the fallen man. The alternative to that unfortunate perspective can only be the reevangelization

of our continent – both by strengthening and renewal of the still vibrant and active Christian communities, and by resurrection and "rebirth" of Christianity in the environments that have already become spiritual deserts. The re-evangelization of Europe can be realized through the synergy of love and grace of the Holy Trinity, on the one hand, and our authentic and tireless testimony of Christ the Lord, on the other. I sincerely believe in this, salvational and joyful perspective, convinced that we all share this belief. For, if it were not so, we would not be here now.

What encourages us and gives hope is certainly the fact that we have gathered, now and here, not only to witness the historical existence of the Christian tradition in the countries we come from, but also to witness to Christ *together* and in mutual love, although aware of the differences and the divisions among us. At the time when religious feelings and beliefs of European Christians are discredited, and sometimes rejected in media and increasingly more in judicial and political cases, when sadness overtakes our hearts and souls, we look like those "men of Galilee" before whom two white angels stood on the Mount of Olives and asked them: "Why do you stand looking into heaven?" (Acts 1:11).

We know why "we stand looking into heaven". We know why our sadness automatically turns into joy. We know, specifically, about Whom and what are we called upon to witness in Europe and "to the end of the world".