

The Russian Orthodox Church's Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights

Throughout human history the understanding of what constitutes the human being has considerably influenced the way in which people have organized their private and public life. Despite the profound differences existing between particular civilizations and cultures, every one of them has some ideas of human rights and obligations.

In the world today there is a widespread conviction that the human rights institution in itself can promote in the best possible way the development of human personality and social organization. At the same time, human rights protection is often used as a plea to realize ideas which in essence radically disagree with Christian teaching. Christians have found themselves in a situation where public and social structures can force and often have already forced them to think and act contrary to God's commandments, thus obstructing their way towards the most important goal in human life, which is deliverance from sin and finding salvation.

In this situation the Church, on the basis of Holy Scriptures and the Holy Tradition, has to recall the basic affirmations of Christian teaching on the human person and to assess the theory of human rights.

I. 1. The human rights theory is based on human dignity as its fundamental notion. This is the reason why the need arises to set forth the Church's view of human dignity.

According to the Biblical revelation, God not only created human nature but also endowed it with qualities in His image and after His likeness (cf. Gen. 1:26). It is the only ground which makes it possible to assert that human nature has an inherent dignity. St. Gregory the Theologian, speaking about human dignity as related to the act of divine creation, wrote:

'God has endowed all human beings so generously so that by distributing His gifts equally He may also show the equal dignity of our nature and the abundance of His grace' (Oration 14 On the Love for the Poor).

The incarnation of God the Word showed that human nature did not lose its dignity even after the fall, for the image of God in it remained indelible, which means that an opportunity remained for restoring human life in the fullness of its original perfection. This is embedded also in the liturgical texts of the Orthodox Church:

'I am an image of thy glory ineffable, though I bear the brands of transgressions... O thou who of old didst call me into being from nothingness, and didst honour me with thine image divine, but because I had transgressed thy commandments hast returned me again unto the earth from which I was taken: Restore thou me to that image, and to my pristine beauty' (Troparia from the Order of the Funeral of the Dead).

The fact that the Lord Jesus Christ assumed human nature in its fullness except for sin (cf. Heb. 4:15) shows that this dignity does not apply to the distortions resulting from the fall.

I. 2. In Orthodoxy the dignity and ultimate worth of every human person are derived from the image of God, while dignified life is related to the notion of God's likeness achieved through God's grace by efforts to overcome sin and to seek moral purity and [virtue](#). Therefore, the human being as bearing the image of God should not exult in this lofty dignity, for it is not his own achievement but a gift of God. Nor should he use it to justify his weaknesses or vices, but rather understand his responsibility for the direction and way of his life. Clearly, the idea of responsibility is integral to the very notion of dignity.

Therefore, in the Eastern Christian tradition the notion of 'dignity' has first of all a moral meaning, while the ideas of what is dignified and what is not are bound up with the moral or amoral actions of a person and with the inner state of his soul. Considering the state of human nature darkened by sin, it is important that things dignified and undignified should be clearly distinguished in the life of a person.

I. 3. Dignified is a life lived according to its original calling laid down in the nature of the human being created for participation in the good life of God. St. Gregory of Nyssa affirms:

'If the Deity is the fullness of good, and this is His image, then the image finds its resemblance to the Archetype in being filled with all good' (On the Creation of Man, Chapter XVI).

Human life therefore lies in seeking 'God's likeness in all [virtue](#) so far as it is possible for man', as St. John of Damascus says in his Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith. The patristic tradition describes this elicitation of the image of God as deification.

The God-given dignity is confirmed by a moral principle present in every person and discerned in the voice of conscience. This is what St. Paul writes about it in his Epistle to the Romans:

'The work of the law is written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another' (2:15).

Thus moral norms inherent in humanity just as moral norm set forth in the divine revelation reveal God's design for human beings and their calling. These norms are guidelines for a good life worthy of God-created humanity. It was the Lord Jesus Christ Who showed the greatest model of such a life to the world.

I. 4. A life in sin is unworthy of the human person as it destroys him and inflicts damage on others and the world around him. Sin overturns the hierarchy of relations in human nature. Instead of having his body controlled by the spirit, in sin the human person submits to the flesh – the situation brought into focus by St. John Chrysostom:

'We upset the order and an onset of evil occurred so as to oblige us to follow the bidding of the flesh' (Discourse 12 on the Book of the Genesis).

A life according to the law of the flesh is contrary to God's commandments and it does not agree with the moral principle laid down by God in human nature. Under the influence of sin, a person in his relations with others acts as an egoist preoccupied with indulging himself at the expense of others. Such a life endangers the individual, society and the surrounding nature as it violates the harmony of existence and results in spiritual and physical suffering, illnesses and vulnerability in the face of consequences brought about by the erosion of the environment. A morally undignified life does not ruin the God-given dignity ontologically but darkens it so much as to make it hardly discernable. This is why it takes so much effort of will to discern and even admit the natural dignity of a villain or a tyrant.

I. 5. A special importance in restoring a person to his appropriate dignity belongs to repentance based on the awareness of his sin and desire to change his life. A repentant person admits that his thoughts, words or actions are not consonant with the God-given dignity and acknowledges his indignity before God and the Church. Repentance does not humiliate a person but rather gives him a powerful stimulus for seeking spiritual self-cultivation, making a creative change in his life, preserving the purity of the God-given dignity and growing in it.

For this very reason the patristic and ascetic thought and the whole liturgical tradition of the Church refer more to human indignity caused by sin than to human dignity. Thus the Prayer of St. Basil the Great said by an Orthodox Christian before the Holy Communion reads:

'Wherefore I, although unworthy both of heaven and of earth and of this temporary life, even I, a wretched sinner who had given myself over to every evil desire, despair not of salvation, though I have been wholly subject to sin, a slave to passion, and have defiled thine image within me, who am thy creation and thy work; but trusting in thine infinite compassion, draw nigh unto thee'.

According to the Orthodox tradition, a human being preserves his God-given dignity and grows in it only if he lives in accordance with moral norms because these norms express the primordial and therefore authentic human nature not darkened by sin. Thus there is a direct link between human dignity and morality. Moreover, the acknowledgement of personal dignity implies the assertion of personal responsibility.

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The Russian Orthodox Church's Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights

II. 1. The image of God can be either darkened or illumined depending on the self-determination of a free individual, while the natural dignity becomes either more apparent in his life or obliterated by sin. The result is directly dependent on the self-determination of an individual.

Freedom is one of the manifestations of God in human nature. According to St. Gregory of Nyssa, 'Man became Godlike and blessed, being honoured with freedom (□□□ □□)' (Sermon on the Dead). For this reason the Church in her pastoral practice and spiritual guidance takes so much care of the inner world of a person and his freedom of choice. Subjection of human will to

any external authority through manipulation or violence is seen as a violation of the order established by God.

At the same time, freedom of choice is not an absolute or ultimate value. God has put it at the service of human well-being. Exercising it, a person should not harm either himself or those around him. But due to the power of sin inherent in the fallen human nature, no human effort is sufficient to achieve genuine goodness. By his own example St. Paul testifies to what is characteristic of every person:

‘I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do... It is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me’ (Rom. 7:15, 17).

Therefore, a human being cannot dispense with God’s help and close cooperation with Him as He alone is the source of every good thing.

Having rejected God to rely only on themselves, the first people found themselves under the sway of the destructive forces of evil and death and handed down this dependence to their ancestors. Having abused the freedom of choice, human beings lost another freedom – the freedom to live in goodness that they had had in their primordial state. It is this freedom that the Lord Jesus Christ restores to them: ‘So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed’ (Jn. 8:36). It is impossible to find freedom from sin without the mysterious unity of man with the transfigured nature of Christ that takes place in the Sacrament of Baptism (cf. Rom. 6:3-6; Col. 3:10) and becomes ever stronger through life in the Church, the Body of Christ (cf. Col. 1:24).

Holy Scriptures speaks also of the need for a person to make his own efforts in order to be delivered from sin: ‘Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery’ (Gal. 5:1). The same testimony is given by the practical experience of a great number of holy men and women who pursued spiritual feats and reconfirmed the possibility for every person to transform his life. The fruits of human spiritual efforts however will manifest themselves fully only in the universal resurrection when ‘our vile body’ will be fashioned ‘like unto his glorious body’ (Phil. 3:21).

II. 2. The Lord Jesus Christ says, ‘And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free... Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin’ (Jn. 8:32, 34). This means that only those are truly free who take the path of righteous life and seek communion with God, the source of absolute truth. But the abuse of freedom and the choice of a false, immoral, way of life will ultimately destroy the very freedom of choice as it leads the will to slavery by sin. It is God alone as the source of freedom Who can maintain it in a human being. Those who do not wish to part with sin give away their freedom to the devil, the enemy of God and the father of evil and captivity. While recognizing the value of freedom of choice, the Church affirms that this freedom will inevitably disappear if the choice is made in favor of evil. Evil and freedom are incompatible.

In human history, the choice made by people and societies in favour of evil led to the loss of freedom and to the enormous loss of lives. And today humanity may follow the same path if such absolutely vicious things as abortion, suicide, lechery, perversion, destruction of the family, the worship of cruelty and violence are no longer given a proper moral assessment and justified by a distorted understanding of human freedom.

The weakness of the human rights institution lies in the fact that (?) while defending the freedom of choice, it tends to increasingly ignore the moral dimension of life and the freedom from sin. The social system should be guided by both freedoms, harmonizing their exercise in the public sphere. One of these freedoms cannot be defended while the other is neglected. Free adherence to goodness and the truth is impossible without the freedom of choice, just as a free choice loses its value and meaning if it is made in favour of evil.

The Russian Orthodox Church’s Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights

III. 1. Every individual is endowed by God with dignity and freedom. The use of this freedom for evil purposes however will inevitably lead to the derogation of one’s own dignity and humiliation of the dignity of others. A society should establish mechanisms restoring harmony between human dignity and freedom. In social life, the concept of human rights and morality can and must serve this purpose. At the same time these two notions are bound up at least by the fact that morality, that

is, the ideas of sin and virtue, always precede law, which has actually arisen from these ideas. That is why any erosion of morality will ultimately lead to the erosion of legality.

The concept of human rights has undergone a long historical evolution and precisely for this reason cannot be made absolute in their today's understanding. It is necessary to give a clear definition to Christian values with which human rights should be harmonized.

III. 2. Human rights cannot be superior to the values of the spiritual world. A Christian puts his faith in God and his communion with Him above his earthly life. It is inadmissible and dangerous therefore to interpret human rights as the ultimate and universal foundation of societal life to which religious views and practice should be subjected. No reference whatsoever to the freedom of expression and creative work can justify the public defilement of objects, symbols or notions cherished by believers.

Not a divine institution, human rights should not come into conflict with the Divine Revelation. For most of Christendom the category of doctrinal and moral tradition is no less important than the idea of individual freedom and the individual should reconcile his freedom with it. For many people in various parts of the world it is not so much secularized standards of human rights as the creed and traditions that have the ultimate authority in their social life and inter-personal relations.

No human institutions, including various forms and mechanisms of the socio-political order, can in themselves make people's life more moral and perfect and eradicate evil and suffering. It is important to remember that public and social forces have a real power and duty to stop evil in its social manifestations, but they cannot prevail over sin as its cause. The essential struggle with evil is carried out in the depth of the human spirit and can succeed only if it is waged through personal religious life:

'Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms' (Eph. 6:12).

In Orthodoxy, there is an immutable conviction that in ordering its life a society should take into account not only human interests and wishes but also the divine truth, the eternal moral law given by the Lord and working in the world no matter whether the will of particular people or people's communities agree with it or not. For an Orthodox Christian, this law sealed in Holy Scriptures stands above any other rules, for it is by this law that God will judge the individual and nations standing before His throne (cf. Rev. 20:12).

III. 3. The development and implementation of the human rights concept should be harmonized with the norms of morality, with the ethical principle laid down by God in human nature and discernable in the voice of conscience.

Human rights cannot be a reason for coercing Christians into violation of God's commandments. The Orthodox Church believes it inadmissible that the believer's view of the human being, family, communal life and church practice should be subjected to a non-religious understanding of human rights. Christians should respond to such attempts as Sts Peter and John did, saying, 'Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God' (Acts 4, 19).

It is inadmissible to introduce in the area of human rights the norms that obliterate or altogether cancel both the Gospel and natural morality. The Church sees a great danger in the legislative and public support given to various vices, such as sexual lechery and perversions, the worship of profit and violence. It is equally inadmissible to elevate to a norm such immoral and inhumane actions towards the human being as abortion, euthanasia, use of human embryos in medicine, experiments changing a person's nature and the like.

Unfortunately, society has seen the emergence of legislative norms and political practices which not only allow of such actions but also create preconditions for them by imposing them through the mass media, education and healthcare systems, advertising, commerce and services. Moreover, believers, who consider such things to be sinful, are forced to accept sin as admissible or are subjected to discrimination and persecution.

According to the law in many countries, actions harmful to others are punishable. However, life experience shows that the damage inflicted by a person on himself tends to spread to those around him, those who are tied with him by the bonds of kinship, friendship, neighborhood, common work

or citizenship. The individual is responsible for the consequences of sin since his choice for evil has a baneful influence on his neighbours and on the whole of God's creation.

The human being is called to good works by virtue of his dignity. The individual is obliged to take care of the world and people around him. He should seek in his life to do good and to teach good, not evil:

‘Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven’ (Mt. 5:19).

III. 4. Human rights should not contradict love for one's homeland and neighbours. The Creator has laid down in human nature the need for communication and unity, saying, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone’ (Gen. 2:18). The love of a person for his family and other loved ones cannot but spread to his people and the country in which he lives. It is not accidental that the Orthodox tradition traces patriotism back to the words of Christ the Savior Himself: ‘Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends’ (Jn. 15:13).

The acknowledgment of individual rights should be balanced with the assertion of people's responsibility before one another. The extremes of individualism and collectivism cannot promote a harmonious order in a society's life. They lead to degradation of the personality, moral and legal nihilism, growing crime, civil inaction and people's mutual alienation.

The spiritual experience of the Church however has shown that the tension between private and public interests can be overcome only if human rights and freedoms are harmonized with moral values and, most importantly, only if the life of the individual and society is invigorated by love. It is love that removes all the contradictions between the individual and those around him, making him capable of enjoying his freedom fully while taking care of his neighbours and homeland.

Actions aimed at respect for human rights and improvement of social and economic relations and institutions will not be truly successful if the religious and cultural traditions of countries and nations are ignored.

Some civilizations ought not to impose their own way of life on other civilizations under the pretext of human rights protection. The human rights activity should not be put at the service of interests of particular countries. The struggle for human rights becomes fruitful only if it contributes to the spiritual and material welfare of both the individual and society.

III. 5. The realization of human rights should not lead to the degradation of the environment and depletion of natural resources. The rejection of divinely-revealed guiding lines in the life of both the individual and society leads not only to disorder in interpersonal relations but also to people's disastrous clash with nature, which has been given to human beings by God to own (cf. Gen. 1:28). The unlimited desire to satisfy material needs, especially excessive and artificial, is essentially sinful, for it leads to the impoverishment of both the soul and its environment. It should not be forgotten that the natural riches of the earth are not only the property of humanity but first of all the creation of God:

‘The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein’ (Ps. 24:1).

The recognition of human rights does not mean that people can squander natural resources in favour of their egoistic interests. Human dignity is inseparable from the calling of the human beings to take care of God's world (cf. Gen. 2:15), to be moderate in meeting their needs, to preserve the richness, variety and beauty of nature. These truths should be taken into account with all seriousness by society and state in defining the basic goals of socio-economic and material-technical development. It should be borne in mind that not only the present but also the future generations have the right to use the natural wealth given by the Creator.

From the point of view of the Orthodox Church the political and legal institution of human rights can promote the good goals of protecting human dignity and contribute to the spiritual and ethical development of the personality. To make it possible the implementation of human rights should not come into conflict with God-established moral norms and traditional morality based on them. One's human rights cannot be set against the values and interests of one's homeland, community and family. The exercise of human rights should not be used to justify any encroachment on religious holy symbols things, cultural values and the identity of a nation. Human rights cannot be used as a pretext for inflicting irretrievable damage on nature.

The Russian Orthodox Church's Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights

IV. 1. There are various traditions of interpretation of rights and freedoms and national peculiarities in implementing them. The modern system of human rights is widely accepted and has a tendency for even greater specification. There is no commonly accepted classification of rights and freedoms. Various legal schools unite them in groups according to various criteria. The Church, by virtue of her basic calling, suggests considering rights and freedoms in the perspective of their possible role in creating favorable external conditions for the improvement of personality on its way to salvation.

IV. 2. The right to life. Life is a gift of God to human beings. The Lord Jesus Christ preaches: 'I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full' (Jn. 10:10). God gave the Prophet Moses a commandment that 'you shall not kill'. Orthodoxy does not accept terrorism and condemns it, as armed aggression and criminal violence just as all other forms of the criminal taking away of human life.

At the same time, life is not restricted to temporal limits in which the secular worldview and its legal system place the individual. Christianity testifies that temporal life, precious in itself, acquires fullness and absolute meaning in the perspective of eternal life. Priority therefore should be given not to the efforts to preserve temporal life by all means but to the desire to order it in such a way as to enable people to work together with God for preparing their souls for eternity.

The Word of God teaches that giving one's earthly life for Christ and the gospel (cf. Mk. 8:35) and for other people will not hamper one's salvation but, quite to the contrary, will lead one to the Kingdom of Heaven (cf. Jn. 15:13). The Church honours the feat of martyrs who served God even to death and the feat of confessors who refused to renounce Him in face of persecutions and threats. Orthodox Christians also honour the heroism of those who gave their lives in battlefield fighting for their homeland and neighbours.

At the same time the Church condemns suicide since those who commit it do not sacrifice themselves but reject life as a gift of God. In this connection the Church cannot accept the legalization of so-called euthanasia, that is, assistance given to those who wish to die, which is actually a combination of murder and suicide.

The right to life should imply the protection of a human life from the moment of its conception. Any intrusion in the life of a developing human personality is a violation of this right. Modern international and national legal acts seal and protect the life and rights of the child, adult and senior citizen. The same logic of human life protection should be applied to the period of life from its conception to birth. The Biblical idea of the God-given value of human life from the moment of its conception is expressed in particular in the words of the holy King David:

'For You formed my inward parts; You covered me in my mother's womb... My frame was not hidden from You, when I was made in secret, and skillfully wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed. And in Your book they all were written, the days fashioned for me, when as yet there were none of them' (Ps. 139:13, 15-16).

While admitting that the death penalty was acceptable in the Old Testament time and there are no instruction to abolish it 'either in the Holy Scripture of the New Testament or in the Tradition or in the historical legacy of the Orthodox Church', we cannot but recall that

'the Church has often taken upon herself the duty of intercession for those condemned to death, asking mercy or mitigation of punishment for them' (The Russian Orthodox Church's Basic Social Concept, IX. 3).

Defending human life, the Church, whatever society's attitude to death penalty may be, is called to fulfill this duty of intercession.

IV. 3. Freedom of conscience. The individual can see the gift of freedom of choice first of all in the opportunity for him to choose particular philosophical guidelines for his life. As St. Irenaeus of Lyons writes,

'God made man free from the beginning, possessing his own power <...> to [obey](#) the behests of God voluntarily, and not by God's compulsion' (Against Heresies, Book IV, Chapter 37).

The principle of freedom of conscience is in harmony with God's will if it protects the individual against any arbitrary treatment of his inner world, against any forcible imposition of particular convictions upon him. It is not without reason that the Russian Orthodox Church's Basic Social Concept speaks of the need

‘to preserve for the individual a certain autonomous space where his conscience remains the absolute master, for it is on the free will that salvation or death, the way towards Christ or away from Christ will ultimately depend’ (IV, 6).

In a secular state, the freedom of conscience, proclaimed and confirmed by law, enables the Church to preserve her identity and independence from people of other convictions and gives her a legal ground both for the immunity of her internal life and public witness to the Truth. At the same time, ‘the freedom of conscience asserted as a legal principle points to the fact that society has lost religious goals and values’ (BSC, III, 6).

The freedom of conscience is sometimes treated as requiring religious neutrality or (?) indifference of a state and society. Some ideological interpretations of religious freedom insist on the need to recognize all the faiths as relative or ‘equally true’. This is unacceptable for the Church which, while respecting the freedom of choice, is called to bear witness to the Truth she cherishes and to expose its misinterpretations (cf. Tim. 3:15).

A society has the right to determine freely the content and amount of cooperation the state should maintain with various religious communities depending on their strength, traditional presence in a particular country or region, contribution to the history and culture of the country and on their civil attitude. At the same time, there must be equality of citizens before law regardless of their attitude to religion. The principle of freedom of conscience does not present an obstacle for partnership relations between the Church and the state in social, educational or any other socially significant activities.

The freedom of conscience cannot be used to establish total control over the life and beliefs of the individual, to destroy his private, family and social morality, to insult his religious feelings, to encroach on things he holds sacred, to damage his spiritual and cultural identity as all this distorts its very essence.

IV. 4. The freedom of expression. The freedom of thoughts and feelings, which presupposes the possibility for disseminating information, is a natural continuation of the freedom of ideological choice. The word is a principal means of communication between people and God and among one another. The content of communication has a serious impact on the well-being of the person and interpersonal relations in a society. The individual bears a special responsibility for his words. ‘By your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned’ (Mt. 12:37) says Holy Scriptures. Public statements and declarations should not further the propagation of sin or generate strife and disorder in society. The word should create and support the good. It is especially dangerous to insult religious and national feelings, to distort information about the life of particular religious communities, nations, social groups and personalities. Responsibility for words has grown manifold in the modern world as it experiences a rapid development of the technologies of storing and disseminating information.

IV. 5. The freedom of creative work. Human creative ability is essentially a manifestation of God’s image in the human being. The Church blesses creative work as it opens up new horizons for the spiritual growth of the individual and for his knowledge of the created world. Called to help reveal the potential of the personality, creative work should not justify any nihilistic attitude to culture, religion and morality. The right to self-expression for an individual or a group should not be implemented in forms insulting for the beliefs and ways of life of other members of society, and one of the main principles of communal life, namely, mutual respect for various worldview groups should be observed.

Sacrilege towards holy things cannot be justified by references to the rights of an artist, writer or journalist. Modern law normally protects not only people’s life and property but also symbolical values, such as the memory of the dead, burial places, historical and cultural monuments and national symbols. This protection should be applied to the faith and things held sacred by religious people.

IV. 6. The right to education. The goal of a person’s temporal life is to seek the likeness of God by means of virtue. Education is a means of not only learning or incorporating a person in the life of society, but also forming his personality in accordance with the design of the Creator. The right to education presupposes learning that takes into account the cultural traditions of society and the worldview of the individual and his family. As most of the world cultures are based on religion, the

comprehensive education and formation of a person should include the teaching of knowledge about the religion that has created the culture in which this person lives. At the same time, his freedom of conscience should be respected.

IV. 7. Civil and political rights. Holy Scriptures instructs the faithful to fulfill their family and socially important obligations as obedience to Christ (cf. Lk. 10-14; Eph. 5:23-33; Tit. 3:1). St. Paul made use of his rights as Roman citizen on more than one occasion in order to preach the Word of God. Civil and political rights offer the individual an ample opportunity for effective service of his neighbour. Using this instrument, a citizen can make an influence on the life of society and participate in governing the state. It is on the way in which an individual uses his right to elect and to be elected, to join freely an association or a union, to use freedom of expression and beliefs that the welfare of a society depends.

The use of political and civil rights should not lead to divisions and enmity. The Orthodox tradition of conciliarity implies the preservation of the social unity on the basis of intransigent moral values. The Church calls upon people to restrain their egoistic desires for the sake of the common good.

The peoples under the spiritual care of the Russian Orthodox Church have developed in their history a fruitful idea of the need for cooperation between the authorities and people. Political rights can make a valid contribution to these state-society relations. To achieve this end, civil interests should have a real representation on various levels of power and opportunities for civil action should be ensured.

People's private life, worldview and will should not become a subject of total control. Any manipulation over people's choice and their conscience by power structures, political forces and economic and media elites is dangerous for a society. Such things as compilation, concentration and use of information about any aspect of people's life without their consent are also inadmissible. Information about a person can be collected without his or her consent only in cases where it is required for the defense of the homeland, preservation of morality, protection of people's health, rights and legitimate interests or the need to investigate a crime and to exercise justice. But in these cases too, information may be collected and used in conformity with the stated aims and in accordance with law. The methods of collecting and processing information about people should not hurt the dignity of a person, restrict his freedom or turn him from a subject of public relations into an object of machine operation. The adoption of technical devices accompanying a person permanently or inseparable from his body will be even more dangerous for human freedom if used to control his personality.

IV. 8. Socio-economic rights. A person's earthly life is impossible without having his material needs satisfied. The Book of Acts tells the story of the first Christian community in which the level of material care for its members was especially high (cf. Acts 4:32-37; 6:1-6). The right usage of material wealth does matter in the cause of salvation. It is necessary therefore to give a clear moral dimension to such rights and freedoms as the right to property, the right to employment, the right to protection against an employer's arbitrary treatment, the freedom of enterprise and the right to dignified living standards.

The exercise of economic rights should not lead to the formation of such a society in which the use of material wealth is turned into a dominating or even the only aim of a society's existence. One of the purposes of economic and social rights is to prevent confrontational stratification of a society. Such stratification is contrary to the commandment to love one's neighbor. It creates conditions for the moral degradation of both society and the individual, generates the feeling of alienation between people and violates the principle of justice.

A society has as its important responsibility to take care of those who are unable to secure their material needs. Access to education and vital medical care should not depend on the social or economic status of a person.

IV. 9. Collective rights. The rights of an individual should not be destructive for the unique way of life and traditions of the family and for various religious, national and social communities. God has laid down in human nature the desire of a human being to share in communal life (cf. Gen. 2:18). In the fulfillment of God's will for the unity of the human race, an important role belongs to various forms of communal life realized in national, public and social associations, while it is in the Church,

the divine-human organism, that God's commandment of love for God and the neighbour is fully revealed (cf. Mt. 22:37-39).

Communal life begins in the family. For this reason St. Paul speaks of the family's participation in the Mystery of the Church (cf. Eph. 5:23-33). It is in his family that a person gains an experience of love for God and his neighbour. It is through the family that religious traditions, social way of life and national culture of a society are handed down. The modern law should view the family as the lawful union of man and woman in which natural conditions for raising children are created. Law is also called to respect the family as an integral organism and to protect it against destruction provoked by moral decay. In safeguarding the rights of the child, the legal system should not deny his parents a special role in his education, which is inseparable from their worldview and religious experience.

It is necessary to respect other collective rights as well, such as the right to peace, the right to the environment, the right to preservation of cultural heritage and internal norms regulating the life of various communities.

Unity and inter-connection between civil and political, economic and social, individual and collective human rights can promote a harmonious order of societal life both on the national and international level. The social value and effectiveness of the entire human rights system depend on the extent to which it helps to create conditions for personal growth in the God-given dignity and relates to the responsibility of a person for his actions before God and his neighbours.

The Russian Orthodox Church's Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights

V. 1. From old times till today the Orthodox Church has been engaged in intercession to the authorities for those who are unjustly convicted, humiliated, deprived or exploited. The Church extends her merciful intercession also to those who are justly punished for their crimes. The Church has repeatedly called to stop violence and mitigate morals during conflicts that flared up when the human rights to life, healthcare, freedom and property were trampled down. Finally, in the years of the godless persecution, Orthodox bishops, clergy and laity appealed to the authorities and society seeking to defend the freedom of religious confession and advocating the right of religious communities to broad participation in the life of the people.

V. 2. Today just as before, we are called to show concern, not only in word but also in deed, for the protection of human rights and dignity. At the same time, we are aware that human rights are often violated in the modern world and human dignity is trampled down not only by the state authorities but also transnational structures, economic actors, pseudo-religious groups, terrorist and other criminal communities. More and more often, human rights and dignity have to be defended against the destructive aggression of the media.

The following areas are singled out for our human rights efforts today:

- Defending human rights to the free confession of faith, prayer and worship (?), preservation of religious and cultural traditions, observance of religious principles in both private life and public action;
- Opposing crimes on the grounds of national and religious enmity;
- Safeguarding the individual against the arbitrary actions of those in power and employers and against violence and humiliation in his family and collective;
- Protecting life, the free choice and property of people during international, political, economic and social conflicts;
- Taking pastoral care for soldiers and protecting their rights and dignity in situations of hostilities and military service in peace time;
- Concern for the respect of the dignity and rights of those who are placed in social institutions and penitentiaries with special attention given to the disabled, orphans, the elderly and other powerless people;
- Protecting the rights of nations and ethnic groups to their own religion, language and culture;
- Concern for those whose rights, freedom and health suffer because of the actions of destructive cults;
- Supporting the family in its traditional understanding as well as fatherhood, motherhood and childhood;

- Opposing attempts to involve people in corruption and other crimes as well as in prostitution, drug addiction and gambling;
- Concern for a just economic and social order of society;
- Preventing efforts to use modern technologies and political manipulation for total control over the individual, his choice of a worldview and his private life;
- Promoting respect for law, propagating the positive experience of implementing and protecting human rights;
- Expertise of legal acts, legislative initiatives and actions by the authorities in order to prevent encroachments on human rights and dignity and aggravation of social morals.
- Participating in the public control over the law enforcement, especially in part regulating church-state relations, and over the execution of fair court judgments.

V. 3. The human rights work of the Russian Orthodox faithful can be carried out on both the church-wide level with the blessing of the Supreme Church Authority and the level of public associations founded by lay people, as many of them are working successfully in the field of human rights already now. In her work for the protection of human rights and dignity, the Church seeks to cooperate with the state and public forces. Choosing her partners in society, the Church remembers the words that Christ the Saviour said to the apostles: ‘Whoever is not against us is for us’ (Mk. 9:40).

V. 4. Motivated by the church teaching on human dignity, freedom and rights, Christians are called to take ethically guided social action. It can be expressed in diverse forms, such as witness before the authorities, intellectual studies, campaigns in defense of particular groups of people and their rights. Without seeking a revolutionary reconstruction of the world and acknowledging the rights of other social groups to participate in social transformations on the basis of their own worldview, the Orthodox Christians reserve the right to participate in building public life in a way that does not contradict their faith and moral principles. The Russian Orthodox Church is ready to defend the same principles in dialogue with the world community and in cooperation with people of other traditional confessions and religions.

This document is adopted by the Bishops’ Council of the Russian Orthodox Church as a follow-up to her basic Social Concept. The canonical structures, clergy and laity of our Church are to be guided by this document in their socially significant statements and actions. It is to be studied in the theological schools of the Moscow Patriarchate. The document is offered to the fraternal attention of Local Orthodox Churches in the hope that it will help our Churches to grow in unity and coordinate our practical actions. Other Christian Churches and associations as well as religious communities, governmental bodies and public circles in various countries and international organizations are also invited to study and discuss it.