Patriarch Irinej of Serbia: The Serbian Church will not accept the legalization of the schism in Ukraine

English version original

In an interview to the Belgrade daily Politika, Patriarch Irinej of Serbia spoke, among other things, about the reaction of the Serbian Orthodox Church to the granting of "tomos" of autocephaly to the newly-created church structure in Ukraine, as well as about the inter-Christian dialogue and major challenges facing Serbia today.

Politika:
How will the grand jubilee of the Serbian Orthodox Church [800th Anniversary of its autocephaly, TN] be celebrated? Do we already know which Orthodox patriarchs will be present at the main celebration at the beginning of October?

Patriach Irinej:
The importance and character of the jubilee condition the form of its celebration. In the first place, the eight centuries since the granting of autocephaly to the Serbian Church will be celebrated in a Christian way and in prayer.
When Saint Sava received the title of archbishop of all Serbia and the Littoral, he began his archipastoral ministry in the house of the Savior, in the monastery of Ziča. At the beginning of October, the Serbian hierarchs, that is, our holy episcopal assembly, will gather around the altar of God in this holy place which is our first ecclesial seat, so that this great anniversary may be celebrated both by the earthly Serbia and the heavenly Serbia, led by Saint Sava and all the saints of our people. Then we will celebrate the Divine Liturgy in the Patriarchate of Peć, our ancient and historic seat.
The celebrations have actually already begun. Last month, our Faculty of Theology have organized an international scientific symposium dedicated to independence and to the eight-hundred-year-old contribution of the Serbian Orthodox Church to Serbian history, theology, and culture.
Many exhibitions, concerts, and solemn events are planned in the capital, in the dioceses of the Serbian Orthodox Church, in the country and in the diaspora.
I take this opportunity to send greetings to all the Serbian people, on the occasion of this wonderful and great jubilee, which every Serbian should experience as a festivity.

P:
One of the most serious challenges facing our State and the Serbian Orthodox Church, is the issue of Kosovo and Metohija. At the beginning of November, the Serbian Orthodox Church holy assembly of

bishops reiterated its position: no matter the cost, one cannot challenge the full sovereignty and integrity of Serbia in Kosovo and Metohija. Since then, problems have arisen with the introduction of a 100% tax on Serbian products [sold in Kosovo, NT], and on the removal of the border between Albania, Kosovo, and Metohija. What do you think about these recent signs of pressure on our people and our State, as they multiply?

PI:

The increase of these external signs of pressure should lead to a stronger unity of the people and the State, in defending sovereign rights and State integrity. This unity should not be destroyed by internal conflicts. Social issues and discontent, that exist in certain strata of our society, should not tear the national soul apart, especially taking into account the simultaneous creation of an Albanian army, and the impediments created to prevent supply from reaching Serbian institutions, hospitals, schools and the like in Kosovo and Metohija.

I followed with great concern the recent demonstrations in the streets of Banja Luka. Those who do not wish the Serbian Republic of Bosnia and the Serbian people well, were happy with these demonstrations. I don't see how inciting such protests in Belgrade and throughout Serbia can be useful for the people. Whether you accept to see it or not, all these happenings are connected. The State and the State bodies, especially those who should be a model for all through their high level of education and knowledge, have an obligation to commit themselves in the creation of a democratic atmosphere, in peace and cooperation, in order to solve problems at all levels of our society.

Just as the Serbian Republic of Bosnia was established with guarantees from the world powers, I pray to God and hope that the time will come, when the leaders of these States will accept the fact that the Serbian people will never give up on Kosovo and on Metohija, their own country. And that along with Russia, our ally and protector, the leaders of our State and the representatives of the Albanians will agree on a solution that will allow both peoples to continue living in peace.

P:

What reports do you get from Kosovo and Metohija, from our clergy and our monks, from the Raška-Prizren diocese? What does their daily life look like? And what about their struggle to preserve our holy places?

PI:

Whenever I can, I stay in Kosovo and Metohija, as the seat of the Orthodox Church is in the Patriarchate of Peć, and this monastery is stavropegic, that is, under the direct jurisdiction of the patriarch. Wjen I'm there, I hear and see what is happening to our people, north and south of the Ibar River. The majority of our people in other parts of Serbia, or anywhere in the world where they live freely, have a hard time understanding that the people and clergy in Kosovo constantly experience worry for the next day, for the safety of their children, of their houses and holy places…

The people who live there have unfortunately become accustomed to all this, since this has been the situation in Kosovo and Metohija since slavery, at the time of the Ottoman domination. The Ottomans used to hire hill tribes to murder enslaved Christians. Tyranny went on during the two world wars. Problems were concealed during the half-century rule of the Yugoslav communists, as we can see in the major book written by Patriarch Paul of blessed memory. It's entitled "Reports from crucified Kosovo and Metochia", and it chronicles the continuous violence and persecution of Serbians in the time of Tito's Yugoslavia.

But the responsibility is ours, we the Serbian. We strayed from God, from the Church, from serbness. We strayed from ourselves. This was the case for all of us, and it still is today. Everything was more important to us than serbness and Orthodoxy. But God always gives us the opportunity and calls us in different ways to repent and correct our behavior, and to be unique in defending our people and our holy places in Kosovo and Metohija. The most important thing is that we are not faint-hearted, that we do not give up in advance. The Lord God is ultimately the master of History. Let us be faithful to God and to the Church, to Saint Sava, to the holy Tsar Lazar. And God will not forget us, neither us, nor our Kosovo, nor our Metohija!

P:

The recent granting of the *tomos* of autocephaly, signed by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, to the newly-formed Orthodox Church in Ukraine is a great ordeal for the Orthodox world. The Serbian Orthodox Church has repeatedly stated that decisions made [by Constantinople] about "the Ukrainian question" constitute a violation of the canonical order. How real is the danger that the question of non-canonical and unrecognized ecclesial structures, primarily in Macedonia and perhaps also in Montenegro, could be resolved in the same way? And what is the position of the Serbian Orthodox Church with regard to these structures in the two neighboring States?

PI:

You are right when you say our Church reacted in good time, and mentioned the violation of the holy canons. I feel obliged to repeat here that we are neither against the Greeks nor against the Russians, neither for the Greeks nor for the Russians. The Serbian Church speaks exclusively for the respect of the holy canons and of the century-old order established by them.

Which simply means we are for both sides. It is obvious we are for the Russians and the Russian Orthodox Church, our brothers and sisters by blood, who have been helping us for centuries under difficult circumstances. And likewise, we are for our Mother Church, the Patriarchate of Constantinople, which gave us independence eight centuries ago. Since then, like the other autocephalous Churches, including that of Constantinople, we are equal in rights. The patriarch of our Mother Church is the first among equals. The Serbian Church, and I think the other Orthodox Churches as well, will not accept some sort of Orthodox pope. If they did, they would cease to be Orthodox. The Serbian Church does not nor will accept the legalization of the schism in Ukraine as a legal situation. And we will not accept it on

our canonical territory, especially if such ambitions manifest themselves here.
What Constantinople did in Kyiv, the mother of Russian cities, is a null act. Ukraine has its canonical Church with a legal primate, Metropolitan Onufriy. We know and will know no other. The Phanar knows that the autonomous Church of the Archdiocese of Ohrid is under the auspices of the Serbian Orthodox Church and is led by Archbishop Jovan. From the point of view of the canons, of the possibility of salvation for the faithful, of the fulfillment of the holy mysteries, there is no problem for anyone. Whether you consider yourself Serbian, Macedonian, North Macedonian, Bulgarian, Roma, Greek, it is the same thing. All can approach the chalice of salvation.

So I don't see any excuse for the intrusion on the canonical territory of the Serbian Church. It would be a sort of pseudo-spiritual version of the "Merciful Angel" NATO operation [Noble Anvil/Merciful Angel was the operative name given by NATO to its bombing of Serbia – TN]. In Montenegro everything is clear. This is another State, which is not a problem for us. But all the Orthodox faithful in this country belong to the Serbian Orthodox Church, and with the exception of some Russians who develop business in Montenegro and thus promote the State, almost all of them are Serbian. Who would have anything to ask there?

P:
What about the relations with other Christian Churches, especially the Roman Catholic Church and the Vatican? To what extent can ecclesiastical diplomacy help raise awareness among European States of the importance of Kosovo and Metohija for our Church and for our people?

PI:
Relations with the Roman Catholic Church take place at different levels. At the level of parishes, towns and villages, I am particularly thinking of the region of Bačka and Banat, where our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters are more numerous. We are careful they don't miss anything, in ecclesiastical and social life, they feel no discomfort whatsoever, so that they can perceive Serbia as their own country. That's the position of our bishops in these dioceses, of our priests, and that's the position of our State. We are striving to correct whatever we didn't succeed in doing and whatever made our Roman Catholics fellow citizens not feel comfortable.
Personally, I would be very happy if the Roman Catholic leadership adopted the same attitude in Croatia, in Bosnia and Herzegovina. There are encouraging signs in Croatia, where there are new currents, and the situation is improving. Our people are sometimes discouraged, when they experience pro-Ustasha agitations, falsification of History, for instance regarding the suffering in Jasenovac and other places, and similar events on the premises of the Roman Catholic Church in Zagreb and elsewhere.
But our Church in the Republic of Croatia, with its young bishops and priests, prays and works for the good of all, and for everything to improve for all. I pray to God that their prayers and work, as well as the

prayers of our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters, may bring good to all in this State. The relations between the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Vatican and the Holy See have been strengthened through the dialogue that is taking place on many levels; through meetings, discussions; through sharing of opinion between synodal bodies, State secretaries, and Vatican officials; through the participation of representatives of the Serbian Church in the joint commission for dialogue between both Churches; in academics, through the cooperation between the Faculty of Theology and the Lateran University; through scholarly research and cooperation between the patriarchal library and the Vatican archives. In general, there are things we agree on, but others we don't. Personally, I think highly of Pope Francis's decision to reject Uniatism, and particularly of his approach concerning the issue of Cardinal Stepinac's role. And I am personally very grateful to him for that. We must also appreciate the position of the Vatican, which has not recognized the pseudo-state of Kosovo.

P:
How do you see the place and role of the Serbian Orthodox Church in today's Serbian society? In which areas did it make a significant contribution to society, and in what other areas could it strengthen its role?

PI:
This is such an important and complex question, the answer could be extended to all our discussion today. I will try to answer with a few brief examples. So, from the point of view of the Serbian Patriarch, what should be the role of the Church in society? It is with this idea in mind that I began our discussion today, when I said that "Politika", with its baptized contributors, is part of Saint Sava's spiritual and cultural heritage, which means, part of the Church.
Another example: some time ago, a sincere Roman Catholic journalist from Zagreb, and I would say an honest man, asked me, "why do institutions and companies celebrate the 'slava' [a family or an institution feast day celebration – TN], is this not an abuse?". I answered that the human being is one person. You are not a Christian merely at church and at home, but you are a person who lives and acts always and everywhere as a Christian.

And the Serbians, even when they did not learn catechism, celebrated their 'slava', and thus implanted the essence of faith in their hearts, namely, that Christ is always among us and with us. That's why they celebrate their patron saint, at home, at work, in the army and at school. Thus Christ is always with us, the Orthodox Serbians. That's why we survived, because Christ is with us and we are with Him.
We are used to what is being said in the media: the Serbian Orthodox Church and its followers, and we think the Church means bishops, monks and priests, while the faithful are something else. This is wrong, all of us, we are the Orthodox Church. Bishops, priests, and the people, we are all the Church. And when we mention, as today, that personal interests or those of minority groups should not be placed before the interests of the State or of Kosovo and Metohija, we are talking to our faithful flock. Likewise,

when we ask officials to prevent the people from being poisoned by rubbish and pornography in the media, we tell the faithful of our Church, because we think they should be concerned about it as responsible people, Christians, and parents. And other similar things…

It means that together, we are the Church of Christ, we who today pray, work, love, educate, save, together with our ancestors, since Saint Sava the Nemanjić, and even before him. And we are always part of the Church, not only in the worship building, but also at work, in the street, at school, even in cafés. We must always act as Christians, as Saint Sava's faithful children.

And in his name, I wish everyone a happy holiday, praying that in this jubilee year, we may all be instructed by the work of the first Serbian archbishop.

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