Bishop Irinej of Backa 'On Inaccuracies of Ecclesial and Journalistic Statements on Ukraine'

Bishop Irinej (Bulovic) of Backa, a hierarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church, believes that the unilateral granting of autocephaly to Ukraine by the Patriarchate of Constantinople will destroy the unity of the Orthodox world.

Each day you realise that in the discourse about the Ukrainian church problem, churchmen, educated hierarchs and theologians, on one hand, and usually journalists, both 'secular' and 'ours', on the other, speak and write that the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople is going, or according to others, not going to grant autocephaly to the Ukrainian Church.

However, this way of expressing it is inaccurate both ecclesiologically and canonically and is thus misleading regardless of how benevolent are the motives guiding an overwhelming majority of those who use these expressions. Naturally, I do not argue that such a formulation speaks of a poor theological training of some pastors and theologians of the Church or the intention of non-theologians to distort the realities. In this case, I have an impression that this inept terminology is rather due to carelessness and negligence.

I will explain. In Ukraine, there is a canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which, as an autonomous Local Church, is subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate, is recognized by all the Orthodox Churches without exception and is in the Eucharistic communion with them.

This Church does not wish or ask anybody for autocephaly, not even the Moscow Patriarchate, with which it is affiliated and which in this case would be called to begin the whole procedure by making an appropriate proposal, nor the Patriarchate of Constantinople, which, as the first-throne Church would be called as coordinator to put this matter to pan-Orthodox discussion and a final decision, either positive or rejected for a time being or for an indefinite term.

Existing in this county in parallel with this canonical Ukrainian Church are three schismatic associations and, on top of this, an aggressive Uniate community. And these negotiations about autocephaly are held precisely with these schismatic 'Churches' and at the same time with Ukrainian state authorities without involving the canonical Church and contrary to her wish. Needless to say, the Uniates most impudently interfere in this matter on the side of the schismatics.

Therefore, the case in question is not the project for granting autocephaly to the *Ukrainian Church,* as

we continually hear and write, but rather a program of granting autocephaly to the Ukrainian *schismatic associations.*

Constantinople's actions are explained and reasoned by a desire to remove schisms and restore the church unity of the Ukrainian people on the basis of the recently formulated teaching that, as the Ecumenical throne and historically the mother of all the Slavic Churches, the Church of Constantinople has a right to make decisions in her own right and on her own initiative ignoring the existing boundaries of autocephalous Local Churches and their position or resistance. Nevertheless, this teaching does not hold water because, according to the actual order of the Church, what stand above the episcopate and plenitude of an autocephalous Church is the institution of council alone, that is, the authority of a council of all or a majority of autocephalous Churches (Ecumenical Council) or a council of most of the churches in a large region (Great Council - Μείζων σύνοδος). The first bishop of our East is not absolutely the first, as is the case in the jurisdiction of old Rome, but *the first in Council.* According to universally known Apostolic Canon 34, a Council without the first one is not valid, nor can the first one exist without a Council. It follows that the Ecumenical Patriarch has no right to discuss and the more so to decide on the status of the Ukrainian Church and, accordingly, any other Church, doing it on his own, outside a Council, autocratically.

There is another problem to be added here. How would it be possible to restore lawfully deposed bishops and clergy and their leader Denisenko the false patriarch of Kiev, who is not only deposed, but also even excommunicated and anathematized? Can any Church, including the first one in rank and gory, violate and invalidate the church actions and resolutions of another sister Church? Moreover, does any Church have a right to recognize or not recognize canonical actions of another Church depending on the circumstances and occasions and on the grounds of questionable criteria? On the contrary, the consecrations, transfers of clergy, glorification of saints, etc. on one hand, and defrocking, depositions, suspensions from celebration and other penances, on the other, are automatically recognized and become valid in all the Churches without exception. If this principle of internal cohesion and mutual penetration of Churches is removed, the whole structure and function system of the church organism is immediately violated. The right observance of the above-mentioned principle first of all excludes any dialogue with schismatics 'as equals' on one hand while on the other it leads them to return with repentance to unity with the Church and to canonical order. Then they can and have the right to make their demands and also to appeal for autocephaly first to their own Church and then, through her, to the whole Church.

This method has been until recently strictly observed by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, with regard to both the schisms in Ukraine and the schism in Skopje. Under the present All-Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch there was a time when Phanar refused to receive the schismatics from Skopje for a discussion on their problem without a preliminary consent of the Serbian Patriarchate. At that time it

was unthinkable that they could appeal directly to the Ecumenical Patriarch bypassing the Church from which they had fallen away and that their questions could be included in the agenda of the Holy Synod of Constantinople. For all that, the Serbian Church has recently learnt about such facts only from the mass media. There is an apparent analogy with the Ukrainian problem. Let us ask a question: What is the meaning of the term 'autocephalous Church'?

However, the worst and the saddest thing is that the declared goal of the operation called *Ukraine* – the abolishment of the schisms and the unification of the Orthodox Christians in Ukraine – is doomed to failure. Schisms cannot be overcome through half-measures based on a formal and affected appeal of the schismatics who are actively supported by the secular authorities and obscure external political centers that usually act secretly. At most, the outcome will include a decrease in the number of schismatic groups; instead of three entities existing at present, there will possibly or probably be a new 'confederation' poorly connected, recognized by some and not recognized by other Churches, whereas the canonical majority Church will remain where she is now: under the protection and aegis of the Moscow Patriarchate. And this same Mr. Denisenko, once Metropolitan Philaret and once one of the most probable candidates to the Patriarchal Throne of Moscow and today the self-proclaimed 'Patriarch of Kiev (will he reserve this title?) confirms the truth of my words stating that in the future the Russian-speaking people will belong to Moscow, as they are today, while the Ukrainian-speaking ones will belong to him (whom else?). This man, worthy of respect for his age but otherwise a miserable and pitiable person, forgot to mention only one detail: almost all the people in Ukraine are Russian-speaking, while there are quite a few of those who also speak Ukrainian. I assume that the old age in case of Mr. Denisenko and the approaching elections in case of Mr. Poroshenko are the driving forces which explain the haste and impatience of the both. But at the same time, I cannot understand why Constantinople is in a hurry? What will Orthodoxy benefit from all this? Is it worthy of putting at risk its unity for the sake such a perspective? I very much doubt it. The schism will remain anyway, either in the form of three entities or in the form of one. Therefore, the Great Church of Christ is working in vain. And I very much hope that she sees the rattling sword of schism not only in Ukraine but also through the whole Orthodox world. Heaven forbid!

I know that in the past many schisms and not only schisms but also heretical movements were overcome, and their supporters reunited with the Church after repentance and renunciation of their delusions. But as far as I know, in the two-millennia-long history of the Church there are no precedents of schismatics entering the Body of the Church and ascending automatically the highest historical way of life of any Church and joining the assembly of the most glorious and prominent Churches without an interim period of maturity, asceticism, restoration of church morals and way of thinking – all this only thanks to the 'grace and generosity' of the first-throne Church.

It should be noted that some historical Churches renowned for their spiritual level, witness and

contribution, which have never fallen into the abyss of heresy and schism, have not yet received autocephaly and most probably will never receive it. In spite of this, they do not protest or complain or whimper. Therefore, the conclusion offers itself as an oxymoron: it means that as a schismatic community you sooner or later will be acquitted, restored and, moreover, elevated to the status of autocephalous Church. A schism will thus cease to be a cardinal sin and a crime not washed out even by blood but will turn into a mere light mistake easy to heal and, ultimately – O strange miracle! – To be rewarded. Whether we want it or not, but the barrier for a multitude of new schisms is thus removed and the Orthodox Church is running the risk of becoming a vineyard without a fence while causing an irretrievable damage, temptation to conscience and loss of credibility of our Church among both non-Orthodox Christians and non-Christians and non-religious people.

I write all this with a great grief and spiritual pain while revering and loving the Great Martyr Church of Christ with all my heart; *I speak the truth in Christ. I am not lying, my conscience confirms it through the Holy Spirit. I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart* (Rom. 9:1-2, cf. 2 Cor. 11:31, Gal. 1:20, 1 Tim. 2:7), as a consequence of the recent situation, tension and differences over the healing of wounds inflicted by schisms. At present, schisms, instead of being removed from our milieu, have strangely provoked additional spiritual and mental schisms among the defenders of unity themselves, in the wellbeing and harmonious march of the holy Churches of God. It is for the sake of the assertion of these values that *my concern for all the churches* (2 Cor. 11:28) fills my heart of a humble Orthodox bishop, so that I as '*less than the least of all the Lord's people* (Eph. 3:8, cf. 1 Cor. 15:9) cannot be silent in order to avoid possible mean and worthless accusations of infidelity, betrayal, defection, etc. On the contrary, love of the Church of St. Andrew and every Orthodox Church makes me speak up and not to be silent, to say the truth conscientiously and openly.

From my heart I wish that the Builder and Bridegroom of the Church, our Lord Jesus Christ by the grace of the All-Holy Spirit and by the grace of God and the Father, through the intercession of our holy and God-bearing fathers – John Chrysostom, Gregory the Theologian, Photius the Great and all those who have glorified the throne of New Rome, together with holy Metropolitans of Kiev and Patriarchs of Moscow and all the saints, may have mercy and enlighten and save all of us! I have written and saved my soul.

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