Holy See expresses solidarity with Ukrainian Orthodox Church over the attempts to adopt anti-church laws in Ukraine

Upon the receipt in the Vatican of Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia's message to Pope Francis of Rome concerning the Ukrainian Supreme Rada's forthcoming vote on Bills Nos. 4128 and 4511, the Ukrainian ambassador to the Holy See, Ms. Tatiana Izhevskaya was summoned to the Vatican State Secretariat on May 17, 2017, to express to her the Holy See's concern over the planned consideration by the Ukrainian parliament of these bills aimed at creating a legal basis for the interference of a secular state in church life.

As has been repeatedly noted by religious leaders, secular experts and human rights advocates that these bills, if adopted, would lead in particular to the introduction of discriminatory restrictions with regard to the largest religious organization in Ukraine and the only canonical Orthodox Church in the country.

In particular, already in 2016, Bishop Stanislav Shirokoradyuk of the Roman Catholic diocese of Kharkov and Zaporozhe, speaking on Radio Maria, said this about Bill 4128: '…Everything possible has been done to enable the Kiev Patriarchate to appropriate parishes of the Moscow Patriarchate. There is a corruption scheme invented to make parishes move freely to the Kiev Patriarchate… It's not good; it's not fair! Right is the one who is stronger. It is not a Christian way. It's raiding!'.

Concerning Bill 4511, he said that 'the Church is Christ's; it is free; why a cage with a special status should be created for the Church? Who needs this law on a special status? It is a humiliation of the Church and, generally, it speaks very bad of Ukraine. It does not attest to the democratic nature of the state or rationalism', the Catholic hierarch believes.

The proposal made by legislators have provoked mass protests of the faithful, as hundreds of thousands signatures have been collected for only a few days under appeals to deputies to withdraw this item from the voting agenda. And on May 18, 2017, the day for which the consideration of the anti-church bills was fixed, prayer vigils were held at the Supreme Rada in Kiev and other cities in Ukraine.

In connection with the Bills No. 4128 and No. 4511 as prepared for adoption, His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia has appealed to the Ukrainian President P. Poroshenko and the Normandy Four member: Russian President V. Putting, Federal Chancellor of Germany A. Merkel,

French President E. Macron. An appeal of the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church has been also sent to Primates of Local Orthodox Churches, the Pope Francis of Rome, the UN Secretary-General A. Guterres and the World Council of Churches Secretary General O. F. Tveit. The appeals note that if these bills are adopted, a discriminatory legal practice towards the majority Orthodox population in Ukraine, unheard of in today's Europe, will be legalized – 'which threatens to become a glaring example of encroachment on human rights to the freedom of religious confession'.

On May 18, the bills were not considered in the Supreme Rada.

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Bill No. 4128 on 'the change of subordination' of religious organizations proposes to introduce in the religious legislation the notion of 'the belonging of a person to a religious community' to be determined on the basis of 'self-identification'. In practice it means that any person who claims his or her belonging to a particular religious community will be given the right to vote in making decisions important for the community, such as its move to another jurisdiction. According to experts, the aim of the bill is to legalize the practice of fictitious 'referendums' of a settlement people used as a basis for already captured scores of churches belonging to the canonical Church in Ukraine.

Bill No. 4511 'On the Special Status of Religious Organizations Whose Governing Centers Are Located in the State Recognized by the Supreme Rada as Aggressor-State', actually proposes to oblige all the UOC religious communities to re-register and conclude a discriminatory agreement with the Ukrainian state bodies 'on a special status'. In this way officials will be empowered to control the appointment of bishops and clergy, visitations of bishops and clergy from other countries and will be able to abolish religious organizations 'with a special status' for a wide range of reasons.

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