Statement by Synodal Information Department Regarding the Death of Orthodox Priest and Threats to Religious Peace in Ukraine

The number of victims of the civil confrontation in Ukraine is multiplying every day. On July 31, a cleric of the Church of St. George in the Lugansk diocese, archpriest Vladimir Kresliansky, died of wounds received during the shelling of residential areas of Lugansk. His five children have been left orphans. New reports are coming in about acts of violence against churches of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and her clergy who have found themselves in a battle zone. As a result of the internecine strife, many civilians have been killed, churches and civic building have been destroyed, and hundreds of thousands of people have had to flee the area.

In this tragic situation, the Synodal Information Department is authorized to make the following statement.

The death of many innocent people who are becoming hostages of fratricidal hatred lies heavy on the conscience of those rejecting dialogue and reconciliation. However, the path of peace, the path of life remains open and the Church calls again upon all those who are able to hear the Lord's words, "I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live" (Dt 30:19), to choose this path so that there would be no more victims.

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church tirelessly repeats this God's call to people of good will in the Ukrainian land enveloped in the flames of internecine feud. She does not discriminate among her faithful by their political convictions or those of another sort; she heralds the Word of God, shows her love and care for all her children, no matter on what side of the conflict they have found themselves, and seeks reconciliation of the divided people. The Orthodox clergymen continue to perform selflessly their pastoral ministry and the service of peacemaking in the regions of Ukraine, stricken by the confrontation, under constant danger to both their life and the life and wellbeing of their families. However, they do not leave their flock, "choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God" (Heb 11:25).

At the same time, the Ukrainian Orthodox churches and clergy not only have been suffering more frequently from the aftermaths of the hostilities, but they also are being subjected to purposeful attacks from the Greek Catholics and schismatics who maliciously take advantage of the civil commotion. Priests are subjected to humiliation, tortures and intimidation, as well as to forcible detention and

interrogations. During such interrogations, armed men, belonging to the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church or some uncanonical groups and claiming that they are authorized by the Ukrainian authorities, bring absurd accusations against the Ukrainian Orthodox priests and deliver them ultimatums, such as to leave the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and re-register the church property accordingly.

In his letter to Ukrainian President Petr Poroshenko, Metropolitan Onufry of Chernovtsy and Bukovina, Locum Tenens of the Metropolitan See of Kiev, described some cases of attacks committed by armed men against clergymen in the territory of the Donetsk diocese, including beatings and threats to inflict bodily harm. For instance, in the Amvrosiivka district some armed men tied up archpriest Yevgeny Podgorny, beat him up with a gunstock comb, stripped him of his priestly cross, shot from their guns above his head, and put him into a pit, threatening to kill his son. Many such reports are coming in from other dioceses of east Ukraine. For example, near Slaviansk some people with submachine guns made archpriest Vadim Yablonovsky dig a grave for himself and that same day handcuffed archpriest Viktor Stratovich, put a bag on his head and brought him to a forest where they made him stand on his knees while they were conducting an interrogation.

We call the authority structures of Ukraine and competent international human rights watchdogs to immediately initiate an investigation into the abovementioned incidents.

We are especially alarmed by the attempts of some Greek Catholic clergymen and representatives of schismatic communities to exchange the support of certain radical forces for the right of dictate and violence against parishes of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, steadfast in her peacemaking position. There appear such Greek Catholic and schismatic figures who openly stir up fratricidal hatred, approving violence against civilian population and seeking to initiate persecution of all those, including priests of the canonical Church, who are committed to peace and dialogue.

We call upon the state authorities of Ukraine to put a barrier on the way of those who would like to turn the civil conflict into an inter-confessional confrontation, since it would considerably delay the restoration of the long-awaited peace in the Ukrainian land.

The fratricidal strife in the Ukrainian land can only be ceased by relying on the values common for both parties of the conflict, which have been preserved in the Orthodox spiritual heritage of the God-loving Ukrainian people. We call upon all those responsible for decision-making in Ukraine to support the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in her uniting and peacemaking endeavours for the benefit of all people.

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