



## **Bishop Irinej of Bačka: No one has a right to trifle with centuries-old canonical order of the Orthodox Church**



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*In late December 2020, Bishop Irinej of Bačka, hierarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church, gave an interview to Pečat Serbian news magazine, in which he dwelt, in particular, on such topics as the consequences that the actions of the Patriarch of Constantinople in Ukraine had for the unity of the whole*

*Orthodoxy and the danger to the conciliarity in the Church coming from Constantinople's decisions. Given below are the relevant fragments of the interview.*

**–The situation of the Serbian Orthodox Church has historically always been difficult and implied**

**the overcoming of various hardships and ordeals, both worldly and spiritual. Those who have been**

**for a long time concerned about the future of Orthodoxy often speak about the introduction of neo-**

**papism, with the Patriarchate of Constantinople and Patriarch Bartholomew behind it. As for the**

**schism in Ukraine, the Serbian Orthodox Church took the stance based on the canonical Tradition.**

**In this regard, the Russian Orthodox Church expressed high appreciation of the principled position**

**of the Serbian Orthodox Church and Patriarch Irinej of blessed memory. However, the**

**Greek-**

**speaking Local Churches (albeit not all of them), including the Church of Cyprus, have shared the**

**position of Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, which, to say the least, is problematic. How,**

**in your view, will the events that caused a greatest upheaval in the Orthodox world unfold?**

– The problem of neo-papism that you mentioned does exist, I regret to say. The following evolution occurred: the Patriarchate of Constantinople – the Mother Church for the Serbian Orthodox Church, which is the fact that we have no right to forget and we never forget – made the anti-canonical intrusion into the jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church by “rehabilitating” schismatic communities in Ukraine, but, regrettably, neither put an end to the schism in Ukraine nor mitigated it, deepening and prolonging it instead. The schisms that until recently existed in the territory of Ukraine have spread to the

whole Orthodox world. The Moscow Patriarchate severed canonical and liturgical communion with the Patriarchate of Constantinople, as well as with those Primates and bishops of certain Churches who recognise unrepentant schismatic Yepifany, or, rather, Mr. Dumenko, as the legitimate Metropolitan of Kiev and autocephalous (!) Primate of the Church in Ukraine, while living and acting there is Metropolitan Onufry of Kiev and All Ukraine, well-respected and recognised by the Local Orthodox Churches. Together with him are over a hundred of canonical bishops with more than fifteen thousand priests and tens of millions of believers. Meanwhile, the unconciliar unilateral recognition of the schismatic groups caused not only the schism between the Churches, but also divisions and tensions within the Churches, as is evident from the disputes among bishops and theologians in Greece and Cyprus.

In the ensuing spiritual and canonical chaos, the Serbian Orthodox Church, as you have rightly said, took

the principled position of unequivocal faithfulness to the centuries-old canonical order of the Orthodox Church, which no one has a right to trifle with. The fact that certain people interpret this principled position as an alliance of some against the others is a problem of their conscience and their understanding

of the Church. We are not against anybody, least of all against the glorious and martyred Patriarchate of Constantinople that in 1219 granted autocephalous status to our Church and saw in Saint Sava a person

worthy of becoming the first autocephalous Archbishop of Serbia. However, we are against the steps jeopardizing or violating the unity of the Orthodox Church, as well as throwing doubt on the authority of Orthodoxy in the eyes of the Roman Catholics and non-Orthodox Christians as a whole.

It is difficult to predict how things will unfold, but, basing our reflections on similar precedents from the history of the Church, we hope that in the foreseeable future this crisis will be overcome. God willing, may it happen as soon as possible!

**– At the Council of Crete you already pointed out the inadmissibility of the present-day attempts to**

**create some kind of institution of the “Eastern Pope” in Orthodoxy and even published a text,**

**criticising this approach. What ecclesiological position, in your view, would nowadays allow avoiding the temptations of both centralisation and anarchy?**

– I could give a rather detailed answer to this short question, lengthy enough for the entire edition of Pečat magazine. Put together, everything written in this regard would make up not just one book, but whole volumes. Yet, taking into consideration the available space, I will confine myself to reducing the

topic to its essentials.

What is the substantial difference between the Orthodox and the Roman Catholic ecclesiologies, though

they both recognise the existence of primacy in the Church? The Roman Catholic Church accepts the primacy of the Bishop of Rome, Pope, as primacy of power, as supreme authority in decision-making pertaining to the Church as a whole. The Pope practically stands above the council of bishops: even if all

the Roman Catholic bishops would gather together and decide something, the Pope has in principle an opportunity to put a veto and take a decision at his own discretion. The structure of the Roman Catholic Church can be visualised as a pyramid. At its bottom are laypeople; above them are priests, above the priests are bishops, and at the very top is the Pope. Such structure found its expression in the well-known

Latin proverb *Roma locuta, causa finita* (Rome has spoken. The cause is finished). Truth be told, the “pyramidal” structure of the Church was considerably eased, albeit not abolished completely, at the Second Vatican Council (1961–1965). It recognised the authority of the teaching of the Holy Scripture and Holy Church Fathers which was successively cherished and preserved in Orthodoxy, and that constituting the Church are the people of God, including all her members without distinction, be it bishops, priests, monks, or laypeople.

Unlike the Roman Church, the Orthodox Church does not resemble a pyramid in her structure. Befitting her would rather be an image of a house, a large dwelling house with great many flats and residents, wherein everyone has their own specific function. A service of particular importance is carried out by bishops. Gathered together at the councils, they resolve church-wide issues, and none of the bishops, even

the presiding one, stands above the council. All decisions are taken either unanimously or by a majority of

votes. The presiding hierarch does not have a right of veto and during a vote can be outvoted, but it does

not deprive him of his dignity as the first among bishops. His primacy is not the primacy of authority, but the primacy of honour. He is *primus*, but not outside or above the council; he is *primus* at the council, first

among equals (*primus inter pares*), and in no way first without equals (*primus sine paribus*), which for centuries have been the claims of the Bishop of “Old” Rome, and lately of the Bishop of “New Rome,” i.e. Constantinople, now Istanbul.

Both these claims are unacceptable for the Orthodox understanding of the nature and structure of the Church. According to Canon 28 of the Fourth Ecumenical Council, the Bishop of New Rome received the

same “primacy of honour” that the Bishop of Rome enjoyed in the undivided Church back then; but in the

enumeration or in the diptychs he was in the second place after the Bishop of Rome, because the Roman

primacy of honour is ancient and goes back to the apostolic times. The canon does not impute the primacy

of authority to any of them. There is no such notion in church canons. To sum up, the Church is characterised more by conciliarity than by monarchy. Relations between the first in honour bishop and the

episcopal council, notable for dynamism, are developed in the only possible way determined by Canon 34

of the Holy Apostles: neither *primus* can take decisions single-handedly, without the council, nor the council can do it on its own, without the first bishop. Theanthropic balance and harmony characterise

not

only the Person of Christ, but also His Body – the Church of God. My modest final answer to your question is such: for the great historical ark called the Church, conciliarity is the only possible way to pass

between the Scylla of centralisation and the Charybdis of anarchy.

**– Problems of schism have weakened church unity, inflicting a heavy historical strike on Orthodoxy**

**on a worldwide scale with interference of the foreign, mostly Western countries. Nothing stands in**

**the way of the new uncanonical independent Churches to appear after the so-called Orthodox Church of Ukraine has come into being. These processes are threatening the Serbian Orthodox**

**Church in particular. Can one assume that the threat to the Crna Gora and Primorje Metropolia**

**has been removed and we can look ahead to the future with peace of mind?**

– Under the circumstances the “diplomatic parlance” and euphemisms do not make much good. Certainly,

it would have been better to use more graceful phrases, but they are lost to all sense in face of “bulldozer diplomacy.” I will give you an example. The chairman of the Synod of a leading Orthodox Church, along with the majority of its bishops, clergy, monks and laypersons, had not shown enthusiasm for the

decisions of their Mother-Church – the Patriarchate of Constantinople adopted in connection with the ecclesiastical crisis in Ukraine, including those already applied through which the crisis was allegedly being overcome and the unity of Orthodoxy in the country restored. As a matter of fact, it is well-known that hasty decisions and uncanonical measures had not helped to overcome schism, but exacerbated it and

caused divisions among certain Orthodox Churches and even within them. A long silence of the authoritative Archbishop followed, and the situation would not have turned around, but Mr. Brownback has made an entrance on stage. As the United States Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom since 2018, Sam Brownback has been dealing with religious issues in his own and other countries. After his seven or eight visits to the Archbishop and talks with him, probably about theological

science and the issues of canon law in particular, the position of the Archbishop and the Synod suddenly

took a “Copernican turn.” The result was an immediate formal recognition of the schismatic structure in Ukraine as a real Church in spite of the opposite opinion of many authoritative canonists and theologians

of this Church!

Similar scenarios were played out during the meetings of American officials with the Primate and top representatives of some other Orthodox Churches. Acting on behalf of their really great and powerful state, the officials openly and publicly interfere into the inner religious and canonical problems of some Local Orthodox Churches, though such actions run contrary to the spirit and the letter of the US democratic constitution. I do not want my words be taken as insinuations or unsubstantiated conclusions,

or indulgency to those responsible representatives of the Church who, in my opinion, are monitoring the dangers and temptations pertaining to church unity with a certain lack of responsibility. I speak only about what I read, see and hear. I wish, insofar as I am able, to serve the truth sine ira et studio (without

anger and passion).

As far as the status of our autonomous Archbishopric of Ohrid and our Diocese (or Metropolia) of Crna Gora and Primorje is concerned, I believe that it will stay as fixed in the Tomos issued by Constantinople

in 1922 and recognized by Pan-Orthodox consensus. We should not forget neither the Job's patience nor

suffering endured by Archbishop Jovan of Ohrid for the unity of the Church, nor the newly-deceased Metropolitan Amfilohije's patience and struggle he had fought for the sake of the Serbian Orthodox Church and its freedom.

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