



## **Metropolitan Varsonofy of Vinnitsa tells about unprecedented pressure on the clergymen of Vinnitsa diocese during creation of OCU**



*In 2018-2019, the clergymen of the Vinnitsa diocese of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church experienced the unprecedented pressure on the part of the former bishop and government agencies that had tried to transfer all parishes of the canonical Church to the newly created schismatic “Orthodox Church of Ukraine”(OCU). Metropolitan Varsonofy of Vinnitsa and Bar gave interview on the topic to Nikolay Sapsay of the press service of the Serbian Orthodox Church.*

‘Let’s say that Vinnitsa was a kind of an epicenter. Similar events took place in Kiev, too, but if we look at the regions, we will see that Vinnitsa was a strategic place at which the former President Poroshenko decided to test a pattern of transferring our churches to the new structure that they called a church structure. Vinnitsa was something of an experimental field. The Presidential Administration had a programme of transferring the communities of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and putting pressure on the bishops and clergymen. A pattern of a business structure was applied to the Church. However, they

had not taken into consideration the fact that the believers would not change the most precious to them faithfulness to Christ for anything in the world,” Metropolitan Varsonofy said.

According to him, the pressure on the clergymen had begun in December 2018, even before the ‘Unity Council’ was held in Kiev.

“In Vinnitsa, the former Metropolitan Simeon had been making preparations for that move; keeping up pressure on the clergymen and urging them to change church calendar for a new style. Also, he had forced them to change the parish statutes so that in case of liquidation all property would have been handed over to the Patriarchate of Constantinople. At that time many priests had not understand it, but later the orchestration of events became clear. The city authorities also put pressure on the clergymen, summoning them and persuading to join the new structure with a promise of assistance. In short, the authorities wanted just to buy our clergymen. Thank God, the clergymen remain faithful. Only some twenty priests, almost totally dependent on the former ruling bishop, were an exception. But over two hundred and sixty priests have remained faithful to Christ despite the harassment on the part of the local authorities.”

Metropolitan Varsonofy also noted that in all districts of the region the authorities had to report on the number of priests who had joined the OCU. Later, in a private talk, the chairman of the Vinnitsa state regional administration admitted the failure of the plan.

“It had been planned that during December, up to fifty, and towards Easter even seventy percent of church buildings would be taken away. They also had expected that the same percentage of priests would change jurisdiction, but understood later that their plan had failed despite the adoption of the unconstitutional bills.

One of these bills demanded re-registration of all our communities. Many of our lawsuits are pending, even in the Constitutional Court. The second bill was an illegal bill, like a raider attack. Under this bill re-registration was done by voting of the residents of a village. It means that even non-church people could take part in the voting on the destiny of the parish, and often enough they were brought by buses from other villages. Over two hundred church buildings had been taken away in Ukraine illegally,” Metropolitan Varsonofy added.

He also told about the pressure put on him by the authorities after his appointment to the diocese of Vinnitsa.

“I was appointed a ruling bishop of the diocese of Vinnitsa at the session of the Synod on 17 December 2018. Soon after, I heard on the phone: ‘You are banned from going to Vinnitsa.’ I was told later that the

chairman of the regional state administration had a talk with the heads of all power structures who had received an order from Kiev to impede the arrival of the newly appointed Metropolitan Varsonofy in every possible way. I had been banned from coming to my diocese on the state level. It had been a gross violation of my rights. On what grounds was I banned from coming to my flock? People were waiting for me. It was a difficult situation. The authorities wanted to frighten us and even do away with us using administrative pressure,” Metropolitan Varsonofy said.

He added that the diocese of Vinnitsa of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church was still defending its rights on the seized parishes, the cathedral church and the building of the diocesan administration which the schismatic Metropolitan Simeon (Shostatsky) had unlawfully re-registered to the OCU. Unfortunately, justice today depends on political trends.

“Many people say that there was no political will to support us, and without it courts deliver judgment against us. Regrettably, we have been living in this falsehood during two years,” Metropolitan Varsonofy said in conclusion.

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Source: <https://mospat.ru/en/news/60123/>