



Bishop Victor of Baryshevka, head of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church representation to the European and international organizations, gives interview on violations of believers' rights

On December 1st, 2020, news-politics-com published the following interview in the Greek language given by Bishop Victor of Baryshevka on the Ukrainian issue in international organizations.

Your Grace, you have recently taken part in the 3rd OSCE Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting on Freedom of Religion or Belief. Please, tell us about it.

The OSCE offers a platform for political dialogue on a wide range of issues. As the head of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) representation to the European and international organizations I have been taking part in the OSCE meetings since 2017. Given the restrictions related to coronavirus pandemic, the 2020 meeting took place online.

On behalf of the UOC I appealed to the international community for assistance in ceasing the continuing violation of the rights of believers in Ukraine. Much to our regret, the seizure of church buildings and arson attacks keep occurring along with beating of the faithful and passing of discriminative bills. We are extremely concerned over the fact that the Ukrainian authorities do not stamp out violation that began in 2015 when the followers of the UOC-Kiev Patriarchate, which is not recognized by any Local Church, seized nearly 40 our church buildings, while the attempts to seize more number in the hundreds. The seizures by force were continued by the activists of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) created in 2018 by the ex-president Poroshenko and the Patriarch of Constantinople by merging the two uncanonical structures. Up to now, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church has lost 122 church buildings transferred to the OCU with many breaches of the law. Besides, the state bodies have illegally re-registered 250 UOC parishes on the OCU.

The reason of these acts of hatred for our Church lies in the fact that we have been keeping the ages-old historical canonical ties with the Russian Orthodox Church. I would emphasize that these ties are spiritual and have nothing to do with politics. Bishops in the so-called new territories of the Church of Greece keep spiritual ties with the Patriarchate of Constantinople and that does not prevent the Orthodox Church of Greece from being autocephalous and organizing her life independently. The UOC, which centre has been in Kiev during the last thirty years, has administrative independence granted to

her in the blessed Charter (Tomos) signed by Patriarch Alexy II of Moscow and All Russia.

The nationalistically oriented Ukrainian politicians are making use of all these events in the context of the armed conflict in East Ukraine that influence the current Russia-Ukraine relations in order to draw the electorate's attention on the eve of the election and score political dividends. Unfortunately, 'the image of enemy' is being made of the UOC faithful by certain mass media, representatives of the authorities and politicians who wish to speculate on the topic of war using the UOC in this dirty deed. Indeed, it is much easier to take a church away from common believers than to prove patriotism on the battlefield.

I should note that violation of our believers' rights was widely discussed at the OSCE forum. Certain human rights organizations believe that violation of the believers' rights in Ukraine have the same grounds as in Montenegro and North Macedonia. Politicians in these countries are trying to use religious issue for achieving political ends and wish to sever historical and canonical ties of the believers in Montenegro and North Macedonia with the Serbian Orthodox Church, and of the believers in Ukraine with the Russian Orthodox Church.

As the large-scale violation of the rights of common believers continues, we have to persuade the international community in the need to publicly criticize actions of those politicians and representatives of the authorities who are trying to include the delicate religious issue into their election campaigns and are using believers in their political projects.

Your Grace, what do you think about Europe's response to the violation of human rights in your country and those of the believers in particular? Are you optimistic about it?

The international community has heard about the problems of the believers, but our religious communities have not been active at the international level during many decades. So today we see not only the lack of the international community's knowledge about the problems of Orthodox Christians, but also a deep erosion of Christian values all over the world. That is why during the last years the UOC representation office together with the Orthodox lawyers and human rights organizations have begun to respond as best they could to these challenges. We are engaged in various kinds of legal, diplomatic and informational activities.

At the same time, we understand the range of powers of international organizations and structures with no mandate to consider violations or speak on a certain subject, and we do not expect them, the OSCE including, to take any concrete decision on the UOC. However, the OSCE has been established as a platform for dialogue, and it is very important that at its meetings the diplomatic missions of the OSCE participating states could hear information about the violation of believers' rights and include the facts in

the reports they present to the leaders of their countries.

Also, the OSCE mission in Ukraine is monitoring violations of the believers' rights, and we provide the OSCE representatives with an opportunity of interviewing our faithful at conflict-related places. The OSCE representatives go there and see with their own eyes what is going on. Thanks to these interviews the international community has reliable information on the UOC situation and cannot say that it has not been informed about the problems or that there was an information gap. The UN and the OSCE receive dozens of application letters with the information on the violations of believers' rights; many are published on their websites, but any possible real actions of the international structures is another story.

I must say that we have achieved certain results, though our human rights actions have lasted not so long. A number of decisions for Ukraine have been taken at the UN level thanks to the assistance of the 'Public Advocacy' human rights organization, for instance, on the case of our community in Ivano-Frankivsk. The UN Human Rights Committee delivered decision in "interim measures" procedure that prevented the immediate eviction of the faithful from the church. A special rapporteur on the freedom of religion or belief and some other special rapporteurs who held information on the legal problems of believers have sent a letter about violations to the government of Ukraine.

Since 2017 together with 'Public Advocacy' we have been organizing side events at the UN Office at Geneva to discuss the believers' rights in Ukraine, Montenegro and North Macedonia. These side events took place over the course of the regular sessions of the UN Human Rights Council attended by diplomats from the UN member states, representatives of international organizations, and journalists. It is important that attending these events were our clerics and lay persons who provided evidence of the violations of their rights. I am convinced that all these actions set an example of protecting the believers' rights, and I invite representatives of all religious communities of the world concerned about the situation with Christianity to actively participate in the defense of religious organizations and of Christian values which have been subjected to juridical erosion and different kinds of attacks.

Please, describe the situation in Ukraine. Has it improved compared with the last year?

As I have said, the situation in Ukraine is characterized by the attempts of top politicians to put legal breaks on the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and create an advantage for the 'Orthodox Church of Ukraine.' For instance, a bill has been passed for all religious bodies of our Church to change their name, specifying their belonging to the Russian Orthodox Church. The purpose is to treat our faithful with indignity, portray them as pro-Russian forces, and play the card of military sentiments, thus stirring up hatred and animosity towards our faithful, encouraging the seizure of church buildings and giving them to the OCU, which is supported by politicians of nationalist and radical views. This bill has been

suspended by the court ruling, but the problem has not been resolved as the Ukrainian Parliament is not showing disposition to annul this discriminative bill. Also, the Ukrainian authorities have blocked the registration of the Statutes of several dioceses and monasteries, and our central legal bodies cannot carry out their activities.

Meanwhile, various radical structures and some OCU clerics and activists continue their attacks on the communities of our Church, thus triggering new waves of confrontation. Our faithful have to defend their holy sites through a variety of means allowed by the law and according to the precise context. There was a period of relative calm in 2019-20 because the new Ukrainian President Vladimir Zelensky was not so active in pursuing religious policy as the ex-President Poroshenko, but we still see double standards applied to the UOC, the OCU and other religious confessions in the country.

I would like to underscore that the UOC does not demand special consideration from the State. We stand in favour of equal rights for all confessions of Ukraine in accordance with laws and regulations irrespective of the number of members. During the last five years we have felt strong outside pressure, yet the UOC is the largest confession in Ukraine with 12,338 parishes, 12,411 clerics, and 254 monasteries and convents with nearly 4,500 monks and nuns.

A major problem is the impunity of the offenders who seize our church buildings, not concealing their identities and even posting videos of their crimes on social media. If the authorities were treating the perpetrators in accordance with the law, many problems could have been resolved in a civilized way, but the temptation to politicize religious issue prevails in our country.

In conclusion I would like to thank you for an opportunity for this interview, which, I hope, will help many interested Orthodox residents of Greece and other European countries learn more about the real life of the Church in Ukraine.

Information and Education Department

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