



Archbishop Jovan of Ohrid: the authorities do not execute the Strasburg court decision



Hard oppression and persecution endured today by the Ukrainian Orthodox Church are compared by many to the difficult situation of Orthodox Christians in North Macedonia. The authorities of that country like Kiev encourage the local schismatics by all possible ways and encroach on the rights of the canonical Church - the acting Archdiocese of Ohrid of the Serbian Orthodox Church. . Archbishop Jovan of Ohrid (Vraniškoski) has repeatedly found himself in prison because of his principled position. Thus spring, he has visited Moscow to meet with representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church. He also gave an exclusive interview to RIA Novosti new agency, on the primary challenges facing the world Orthodoxy.

- Your Eminence, what is the present situation of the canonical Church, her clergy and faithful in the Republic of North Macedonia? Why the Orthodox Archdiocese of Ohrid is still not registered?

- You have asked a very good question because some are unaware of the very beginning of this story. After World War II, the country that is now called North Macedonia was to be incorporated in Yugoslavia as an independent republic. Some people began developing an idea that each republic should have its own Church. Thus, the idea developed that this country - called at that time the Socialist Republic of Macedonia - should rest on a certain church foundation as well. .

However, a fact is a fact: up to that moment, this republic did not have an independent church tradition, such as for instance the Serbian, Bulgarian and Russian Churches. So they in Macedonia had to invent it. In 1958, they declared the autonomy of their church. In that situation, the Serbian Orthodox Church recognized that church as autonomous (self-governed part of the SPC - ed.). However, in 1967, this very church declared its autocephaly (full independence - ed.). Great problems began since, as this status was not recognized by other Local Orthodox Churches.

What I have said was the background, but in our days, since 1991 when Yugoslavia disintegrated, the situation changed. Then the idea was set forth again that the new independent republic should be based on the Church. Certainly, North Macedonia is a small country but it is not the point at all. In the present situation in Orthodoxy, it is very difficult to imagine that a new autocephalous Church can be recognized.

Aware of this situation, we have come to the Nis Agreement, which was signed in 2002 by three metropolitans of the so-called Macedonian Orthodox Church and three metropolitans of the Serbian Orthodox Church. And later, at the Bishops' Council of the Serbian Church, it was ratified so that the Macedonian Church could exist as autonomous again within the bounds of the Serbian Patriarchate.

However, consequently, under the pressure of the authorities, the so-called Macedonian Orthodox Church disavowed that agreement. We have remained committed to that agreement. Until 2002, I was a hierarch of the schismatic Macedonian Church and after that agreement I was accepted in the Serbian Church thus proving to be the only hierarch who moved from the schism to the Serbian Church.

Then the late Patriarch Pavle of Serbia appointed me as exarch of Macedonia. Soon after that, the Council of the Archdiocese of Ohrid took place: it was how the Macedonian Church was named in the Nis Agreement. We elected new bishops who were consecrated by the Patriarch of Serbia and in 2005 we were granted full autonomy. We had all that was necessary to become autonomous.

- Was it exactly at that time that full-scale persecution began against the canonical Church in Macedonia and personally against you?

- Since that time, our Golgotha has begun. Local Macedonian authorities disagreed with the existence

within their state of a Church subjected to the Patriarchate of Serbia. For me, a hard time began as a great deal of far-fetched legal cases were brought against me. I was imprisoned ten times. As a result, the situation normalized: with the arrival of Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk (December 2014 - ed.) I was released from prison.

Since that time, we actually have had no problems. However, local authorities are reluctant to recognize us as a Church in their own country. We appealed to the Strasburg Court of Human Rights and ultimately received a positive decision that the authorities should recognize us. The decision was made four years ago, in 2017, but we are still not recognized. But we are waiting.

- You are aware of the difficult situation of canonical Orthodoxy in Ukraine. The interference of the Patriarchate of Constantinople has deepened the church schism. Churches are captured; attacks are made against the faithful, threats are voiced to adopt discriminatory laws. What would you say in support of the clergy and faithful of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church?

- I will be sincere. I am grieved by all the events that are happening now around the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. First, because even when I was in the schism, I always thought about the unity of the Church. My doctor's dissertation, which I defended in Salonika, is entitled 'The unity of the Church and today's ecclesiological problems'. I began thinking about it as far back as the time of the Macedonian schism, but I began thinking even more about it when we witnessed all that we see in Ukraine today. And already at that time I said to myself that we in the Orthodox Church should stop discussing problems secondary for Orthodoxy.

The unity of the Church should be guarded like the apple of one's eye - it is so important that we cannot be called a Church if we have no unity among us. There is one God and there is one Church. We have no other God, nor other Church.

We are tormented by the problem of situation in Ukraine. And we cannot foretell whether the same problem will emerge elsewhere. It is not a problem of the status of a particular bishop, that is, what place he will occupy, but a dramatic problem that obliges us to adopt the right attitude. Therefore, we pray that the Lord may enlighten us and that we could approach it in essence.

I would like to express the wish that the Orthodox in Ukraine may perceive the situation as a certain test. I think that after this period of trials in the life of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church a better period will come. As St. Athanasius the Great said many centuries ago, it is a small cloud, it will soon pass away.

- How actively do the authorities and public in North Macedonia promote today the idea of

‘Macedonian autocephaly’? In your opinion, how real is the scenario of the Patriarchate of Constantinople’s recognition of the uncanonical Macedonian Orthodox Church in the wake of Fanar’s creation of the so-called ‘Orthodox Church of Ukraine?’

- I will tell you honestly that when the well-known events happened in Ukraine, I could not imagine that they would develop precisely this way. When my opinion was asked about whether the Ecumenical Patriarchate and other Orthodox Churches will recognize this new autocephalous Church of Ukraine’, I answered in the negative. But today when it has already emerged, I do not express my opinion since I do not know how the situation will develop further.

Anyway, both the prime minister of North Macedonia and the president sent letters to the Patriarchate of Constantinople asking to recognize the so-called Macedonian Orthodox Church. I ask myself a question of the way in which he would recognize it. Would it be the same way as the so-called autocephalous Church of Ukraine was recognized?

The president and prime minister mentioned in their letters the right of appeal to the Patriarch of Constantinople and called him to use it for the recognition of the ‘Macedonian Church’. However, the question remains open whether the other Orthodox Churches will recognize this right as belonging to the Patriarch of Constantinople both overall and in this particular case.

Recently I have finished a book that has not come out yet but I think it will be published in May. In it I ask myself a question: will this right of appeal to the Patriarch of Constantinople apply to all the existing organizations? That is to say, may all appeal to the Ecumenical Patriarch? I do not know what will come out of this appeal of the North Macedonian government but I do know that if the Ecumenical Patriarch makes a unilateral decision once again, the Church will encounter obstacles.

- And how do you evaluate the activity of Patriarch Bartholomew and the claims of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, which have emerged under him, to primacy in the Orthodox world, to the status of ‘first among equal’ reminding us of the status of the Pope of Rome in the Catholic Church?

- Recently I have familiarized myself with the text of today’s Archbishop of America, Elpidophoros, the former Metropolitan of Prussia (the article came out about three years ago - ed.), who is called precisely as - ‘first without equals’. Having studied it, I realized that it is based on criticism of a document of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church, 2013, in which a difference is made between three levels of primacy in the Church: diocesan, local and ecumenical.

In the document of the Russian Church - and I agree with it - it is stated that the principle of primacy has

dogmatic grounds (the key significance sealed in the canons of the Church - ed.) only on the first, diocesan, level, Each bishop, the head of a diocese, is an image of Christ, and it is on this level that the principle 'first without equal' works.

As for the second and third levels (i.e. in the context of a particular Orthodox Church and the whole family of Orthodox Local Churches), the matter of one's primacy is just a matter of the organization of church life and in it the principle of 'first without equals' cannot work. Metropolitan Elpidophoros, with regard to these levels - local and ecumenical, presents a different interpretation of primacy...

However, today the Ecumenical Patriarch is not elected by the whole Orthodox Church, but only by the Synod of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. For this reason, he cannot be 'the first without equals', but just 'the first', such as we recognize him, but the first among equals.

In my book, I study this issue in detail and underline in it that I would not like to be engaged in an historical argumentation of primacy or to study all the documents, but to say that ecclesiologically (from the point of view of the teaching about the Church - ed.) and dogmatically Patriarch Bartholomew has not such rights to primacy in the Ecumenical Church. The more so considering the way in which he exercises it.

Interviewer Sergey Stefanov