Irinej, Bishop of Bačka: “Patriarch Bartholomew’s Interference in Ukraine Has Caused a Schism Throughout the Whole of World Orthodoxy”



Interview with Serbian Newspaper Politika

Is there any basis for the fears expressed recently in an interview with a journalist by the metropolitan of Volokolamsk Hilarion that in modern-day Europe the Bible might be banned as a ‘discriminatory’ book as it teaches us that God created man and woman that a person’s sex is determined by biological birth, that is, something that goes against the ideology propagated by transgender activists?

Many well-intentioned – but ill-informed – people might think that the renowned Russian bishop was resorting to exaggeration to describe the situation as he sees it. However, in the cultural section of the newspaper Politika I read the following sentence: “Everything that you can imagine has now become a reality which would shock even Jonathan Swift.” This declaration by an American satirist speaks of the spiritual condition of modern-day America, but it could equally apply to Europe where persecution of the

Bible and persecution of Bible teaching is a tradition almost as ancient as the Bible itself.

Christians were persecuted in the first centuries of Christ's Church. Then there were persecuted those who venerated only the first older part of the Bible. The Jews were at first killed and then sent into exile and then murdered in the gas chambers. As a result of their understanding of the Bible many of them disappeared as a result of pogroms and persecution (for example, 'St. Bartholomew Night', the inquisition, European religious wars…). At the same time, in the Middle East and the Balkans Christians were cruelly tortured and murdered by those who adhered to the then version of Islam, although the Koran recognizes and respects Christians and Jews as 'People of the Book', that is, as people of the Bible. And finally, in modern times millions of people were annihilated at Auschwitz, Jasenovac and many, many other concentration camps, in the labour camps of Kolyma and the multitude of 'islands' making up the Gulag archipelago. The majority of them suffered mainly (or above all) because they followed the Bible, its teachings and ethics, which means they also remained loyal to the Church in which and for which the Bible was written and was inspired by God, in which the Bible was preserved and interpreted.

At the present time in Europe there is no physical death penalty but there is a spiritual one. For Christians, as well as for other sincere believers such as Jews and Muslims, as well as those who adhere to the other great religions of the world, the so-called gender ideology is completely unacceptable. The notion of suggesting to boys in nursery school that they should wear a dress rather than trousers so that they can decide themselves which sex they want to be and when at home they have 'two fathers' or even 'two mothers' is fr om the perspective of biblical teaching monstrous and even demonic.

It is a tragedy that in recent times in Serbia too books are published for school children and even children of pre-school age which educate our children in this spirit. Would it be an exaggeration to say that this is spiritual killing? Moreover, without a real understanding of people and without putting to a vote their opinions and wishes legal bills are imposed and insinuated upon people which gradually lead to a public recognition of the view that homosexuality is simply a matter of individual choice where there is no place for the Creator or human nature, which lead to the adoption of children by so-called same-sex couples, thought of as an alternative to marriage and the family. They even provide for punishment for verbal insult. The intention is to ban priests fr om propagating the Church's teaching that marriage is sacred beyond the confines of church buildings. Real democracy! So, even in Serbia there are undoubtedly circles which unconditionally speak out for a ban on biblical teaching.

The Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church ruled the bill on same-sex unions to be unacceptable, emphasizing that most of its provisions go against the centuries-old teaching of the Church and proposing that property, legal and other issues of partners in these

communities should be regulated by other laws. What is it in the present bill which the Church finds most problematic and were the rights of partners in same-sex unions taken into account when composing commentaries to the text of the bill?

The Synod offered its opinion on this business in a statement which bears a balanced yet clear and unambiguous nature. Our proposal was initially sent to the Serbian government. We did not want as a result of this to inflame public discussion. The Church is the last institution which would want to cause division on whatever grounds among the people, which already has been deprived of the opportunity of getting acquainted with the bill and expressing its opinion of it, and which has thereby been subject to discrimination when trying to insist on its rights.

We reject nobody and cast nobody away as a result of their personal preferences or whatever problems. On the contrary, we are ready to give spiritual help and support to any and every person. However, we are not ready, as some might expect, to greet enthusiastically the propaganda and advertising of sin as a desired mode of behaviour. Our ministry to God and to people is service to life and not death. We firmly believe that the law on same-sex unions in its present form should not be go through and even more so be adopted by the National Assembly.

What do you, as a former dean and long serving professor of the faculty of Orthodox theology, think of the remarks of a certain part of the academic community that thinks that the university's autonomy is being violated by the amendments to the law on higher education which provides for the right of the Holy Episcopal Synod to give its blessing to professors at the faculty of Orthodox theology to teach (and also to withdraw this blessing), something which, incidentally, took place previously?

Thank you for pointing out that we are dealing with only a part of the academic community and not the academic community as a whole. The truth is that we are dealing here not with everyone or a monolithic group of people. Ill-informed people do indeed believe that they are defending democratic principles and European values for fear of being thought of otherwise. Yet at the same time many have come to the conclusion that this is a trap. And this is why they have phoned professors at our faculty saying that they now know that they have been manipulated. Among those leading the campaign against the faculty of Orthodox theology and against the Serbian Orthodox Church (in the cause or pretext of separation of church and state, the secular nature of society and university autonomy) are usually former (or not so former) Marxists and atheists who have substituted their earlier phraseology for a 'European', a purely 'democratic' phraseology; among them, though, is at least one person who at one time wore clothing similar to that of workers in Maoist China at the time of the so-called Cultural Revolution. To be honest, I am in one sense even impressed by their consistency and their fidelity to ideas which to me seem to be a great error. I do believe, though, that if they could they would be prepared to repeat the very same

things which their fathers and grandfathers did after 1945, which is to say the wearing of Bolshevik-style leather jackets, arrests in the middle of the night, sentences executed by extrajudicial courts…

As regards the faculty of Orthodox theology – a faculty which is one of the founding constituent parts of the University of Belgrade – then there are people who would like to repeat the shameful deed of 1952 when the faculty was removed fr om the university by an illegal decision taken by the government of the time or (as Mitra Mitrović put it in the document containing this decision) was 'liquidated' (a phrase popular with the rulers of that time). Those who today support similar such ideas of course do not express things so directly. They are eloquent and nice-sounding 'European' and 'democratic' words roll off their tongues. They dissimulate and twist things. They are, after all, 'gentlemen' and not the 'comrades' of Tito and the communist party. They say they have nothing against the Serbian Orthodox Church or the faculty of Orthodox theology being part of the University of Belgrade; they are merely suggesting that it should be removed fr om the baneful influence of the Church because, so they believe, the Church isn't competent enough with regard to its own theology, while professors of the natural sciences are competent, especially if they are atheists. There is, however, one person among them who I have to admire for his honesty and openness: he has said clearly that the faculty of theology should simply be removed. I might call this 'Mitra Mitrović lives!', even though it bears little relation to learning and theology and isn't happening because it sounds superstitious and offensive.

The body of teachers (the collective authors of several petitions with dozens of signatures) claims that it is in this way that they are defending the university's autonomy. 'Autonomy' is their oft-repeated mantra. But what about the autonomy and rights of the other faculties which are also mentioned in the university's charter and the faculty's own charter? Are the faculties merely affiliates of the university or is the university a gathering and family of autonomous and free institutions of higher learning? How are we to act in the future concerning the constitutional and legal rights of the Churches and religious communities in the sphere of enlightenment and education? How are we to act with regard to the decision of the constitutional court of Serbia which at one time ruled in favour of the faculty of theology when it rejected the claims? The constitutional court, moreover, in emphasizing the separation of state and church, not only decided that the Church is called upon and empowered to regulate the life and work of the faculty of theology, which is part of the University of Belgrade, although its constituent founder is the state, but also directly permits the Church to create the conditions for study and for how teaching should be carried at the faculty of theology. Also, the constitutional court uses the technical term missio canonica, that is, permission for pedagogical work. This, of course, causes mystical terror on the part of those who are proponents of the principle of state secularism.

Why, then, are they not going to the embassies of Germany, Austria, Spain, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Slovakia, Croatia, secular France and of other countries and hand in a petition of protest against the violation of the principles of state secularism and the autonomy of the universities in these

countries? What sort of liberals and democrats can they call themselves if they are defending only the University of Belgrade? Of course, universities older and more famous than that of Belgrade, even the Sorbonne, are in greater danger since they too adhere to the practice of missio canonica. I would point out that this term isn't so harsh sound sounding and may even be pleasing to our unfailing democrats and orthodox secularists, but they systematically avoid using it, preferring the word 'blessing.' They try to sound witty when asking ironically where in the University of Belgrade is the category of 'blessing.' Wh ere is it? Here we have a true oxymoron: the term 'blessing', which has only a positive content meaning a 'good word' proceeding from a 'good desire' (compare the Greek evlogia and the Latin benedictio) is for them an exclusively negative term as malignant as the very Church with which it is associated.

If they don't want to make representations to the embassies of countries which think of themselves as being democratic and undoubtedly secular, then why should they not turn the attention of their colleagues from Western universities to the danger that has threatened them for centuries and which they are unfortunately unable to notice? In order to extricate themselves from the awkward position they have put themselves in, they are not telling us that giving a church blessing to those who want to study theology and to those who teach it is a practice and tradition of Catholic countries. Therefore, it does not apply to us as a country with an Orthodox tradition. So, people remember they are Orthodox when convenient! There is a folk saying that yesterday's enemy is today's friend. However, this is pure sophistry and merely an attempt to get out of a tricky situation. It is, in fact, a lie. Until recently, there were few Orthodox Christians in Western Europe, so they could not be represented at an institutional level in universities, only on the group or individual level. Today this is no longer the case. For example, at Munster University there is a department of Orthodox theology, while at Munich University there is an institute of Orthodox theology, and the same principles are applied to both Catholics and Orthodox. There are no procedures for electing faculty members and so there can be no double standards, especially in Western countries.

I would like to use this opportunity to make a comparison with the practice and traditions of Russia. Under the auspices of the Russian Orthodox Church there are theological academies and faculties (or departments) of theology within various universities (not all, of course). In the theological academies everything is done with the blessing and under the guidance of the Church, while it is entirely natural according to the Russian academic tradition that the Church has no say in how universities are run. But, as before, the Church does have the right and the obligation to verify and confirm or otherwise the study programmes of Orthodox theology in those universities which offer them. The universities which have theological faculties and study programmes have to apply for accreditation from two places – the state and the Church. Therefore, in Russia theology is taught with the blessing and approval of the Church. The difference between the Russian and the Western models is that in the West approval (missio canonica) is given with the a priori possibility of refusal from doctrinal or ethical considerations, whereas

in Russia it is given as the culmination of the process of accreditation or the recognition of the academic degree which has been conferred. Faculties of Islamic theology, which exist in regions wh ere there is a significant Muslim population and in regions wh ere the Muslim population is in the majority enjoy the same rights and status in universities of the Russian Federation. Whether our Serbian theorists of state secularism like it or not, contemporary Russia is a democratic and secular country. We do, however, have something to learn from their collaborative model of church-state separation. In short, our theorists here live in this century but they are not of this century. I do not despise them; rather, they have my pity. Like Don Quixote, they are tilting at the wrong windmills. All of this belongs irrevocably to the past.

The Serbian media made a lot of noise about how the Serbian Orthodox Church peacefully and calmly elected its new head Patriarch Porfirije, who is your spiritual charge. On the eve, and this has already become something of a tradition among journalists writing about ecclesiastical gatherings, much was written about divisions within the Church, about different currents and rival factions. What is your impression: are the sources for these commentaries to be found within or outside of the Church?

Outside of the Church, of course, although not without the participation of some internal church groupings. The fact that the patriarch received the support of more than two thirds of the Council's participants when voting in the first round is more than ample testimony to the fact there was no division within the Church. Some bishops, including those who did not vote for him, loudly and joyously proclaimed "Axios!" ("He is worthy!"). It is quite natural that some bishops, each for his own reason, had their own 'favourites.' However, all of them before the Council knew that metropolitan Porfirije had all the qualities needed that would adorn the candidate for the patriarchal throne of Saint Sava. So, God blessed the Council, our Church and our people in the lot cast by the episcopate when it expressed its voice.

Unfortunately, there still remain (and there always will remain) in the final run those who wish to see conflicts among the bishops – not the legitimate and inevitable differences of opinion, not the misunderstandings and differences of opinion that are an organic part of human nature, but simply and exclusively acute divisions and conflicts. Whether acting on instructions from circles that bear no relation to the media or according to their own volition and thinking, these journalists are a cause for regret. I for one believe that some of them have a hard time of it when confronting their own conscience in the mirror. It is for them that I repeat the old and wise rule of the life and mission of the Church: "In the main thing – unity, in secondary things freedom, and in all things – love."

Are there any signs that negotiations are about to begin with the bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church on the issue of the status of the 'Macedonian Orthodox Church'? There are claims that the prime minister of North Macedonia Zoran Zaev, when congratulating Patriarch

Porfirije on his election to the throne of the Serbian first hierarchs, asked the Patriarch of Serbia to become part of a dialogue and search for the regulation of the canonical status of the MOC, although such requests in previous years would be addressed, for reasons more political than canonical, to the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and even the Bulgarian Orthodox Church...

Nobody, including Mr. Zaev, should remind His Holiness the Patriarch and the other bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church, of the need for dialogue. Dialogue is the evangelical and sole possible means of overcoming the schism which has lasted for more than half a century between a number of bishops on one side in North Macedonia and the Serbian Orthodox Church and all the Orthodox Local Orthodox Churches on the other. Our side – let's call it that – has not only exerted all efforts to resolve a problem which has existed since 1967 by means of dialogue and not canonical interdictions should as defrocking, excommunications and anathemas, but has remained loyal in the spirit of brotherly love to the principle of dialogue, even when our interlocutors acted from 'a position of strength' (a fictitious one at that), stating that they beforehand see only one goal and only one outcome of dialogue, which, so they believe, should be the unconditional recognition of their self-proclaimed autocephalous status. Does this not remind us of the position of the self-proclaimed 'republic of Kosovo' which believes, like Brussels, that all dialogue with Serbia has only one goal and one outcome, which is the unconditional recognition of its statehood and independence?

The only condition which we put forward on our part in the course of dialogue has been that dialogue cannot be held while the state continues to persecute the canonical archbishop of Ohrid John and all of the canonical archbishopric of Ohrid, the sole jurisdiction in North Macedonia recognized by all of the other Orthodox Churches, while the schismatic hierarchy has not only not condemned this repression but has even voiced its approval of it. Unfortunately, instead of allowing a relative let up of persecution in order to continue dialogue, the schismatic hierarchy has tried, as you so appropriately noted, to use roundabout means through the Patriarchate of Constantinople and the Bulgarian Orthodox Church to realize their goal, albeit partially. The Patriarchate of Constantinople has responded to Skopje's requests extremely cautiously and with reserve, as has the Bulgarian Church. In this context I would put a question to the Skopje schismatics– sincerely, in the true spirit of brother love: Have you not drawn any conclusions from the situation with the Church in Ukraine? Do you know what the Moscow Patriarchate has given its Church in Ukraine and what the Patriarchate of Constantinople has given the Church there and then taken it away? Are you aware of what the Serbian Church in the Niš accord gave you, and what is now being offered to you by the Patriarchate of Constantinople? Do you realize that you will be compelled to hand over relics to Constantinople as a stavropegial institution, as in effect these holy relics are Greek Byzantine holy objects such as the monastery of Nerezi near Skopje, as well as others, including the Serbian holy objects of the Nemanjić dynasty? Do you ultimately realize that you will have to surrender all of your diocese and church communities in the diaspora to Constantinople (I

would note too that according to the Niš accord the Serbian Church from a position of love and understating recognizes your jurisdiction in the diaspora)?

Apart from openness to dialogue and good will, the 'other side' has to be free from compulsion and pressure exercised by the secular authorities and be willing to take decisions solely in the spirit of canonical church order aimed at the unity and well-being of the Church. We welcome all conversation in good will without any pre-arranged blackmail and ultimatums, a conversation which would create the conditions for the restoration of ecclesiastical unity. We ought not forget that the archbishop of Ohrid John has endured suffering and has made great sacrifices for this unity, unafraid of long years spent incarcerated, in order to preserve his freedom in Christ. He has not been alone in his heroic feats as a confessor of the faith: bishops, priests, monks and nuns and the faithful of the canonical archbishopric of Ohrid have also been subject to persecution, repression, threats, terrorizing and even arrest, and yet they have remained indefatigable. I believe that the circumstances have changed greatly today: nobody in North Macedonia is threatened with persecution or humiliation as a result of which church they belong to. And nobody can justify themselves by saying that he does not have the interests of the Church at heart. If the Church has paramount importance, then we will count this as a blessing in all of our affairs and a victory over the many temptations which we encounter.

In recent days we have heard statements by the Russian Orthodox Church, as well as by the Patriarchate of Jerusalem, on how the possibility is being examined of holding a new meeting of representatives of the Local Orthodox Churches similar to that which took place in Amman (also attended by the Serbian Church). We also heard Moscow state its opinion that there is no longer the necessity to retain the practice of the Ecumenical Patriarch convoking these gatherings as he has been deprived of the status of first among equals as a result of his support for the Ukrainian schismatics. What do you think of these appeals and the comment made in relation to the Ecumenical Patriarch?

Negotiations are needed in order to overcome this conflict. They should be held in various formats, bilateral and multilateral, and the most expedient and fruitful would be conciliar and pan-Orthodox. However, the Patriarch of Constantinople so far refuses to call a pan-Orthodox Council since, as he understands it, as the first among equals bishop of the Orthodox Church he has the right to act independently and autocratically on issues of jurisdiction and autonomy of the Local Orthodox Churches without regard to their opinion, even if it agrees with the opinion of the majority or if it is the generally accepted position of all. A familiar situation, is it not? Unfortunately, this type of rhetoric from the shores of the Bosporus reminds us all too much of the rhetoric that once came from the banks of the Tiber in Italy. The 'New Rome' Constantinople, the Imperial City, today Istanbul wants to become an exact replica of 'Old Rome' in the ecclesiastical sense, which is to say an exact replica in the papal version of the second millennium which the Orthodox Church, headed by the Patriarchate of Constantinople, which

enjoyed the honorific title of the ‘Great Church of Christ’, never accepted and, I believe, never will accept in the future.

Moreover, some theologians of Constantinople vindicate the theory that nobody, apart from the Ecumenical Patriarch, enjoys the right to convoke pan-Orthodox or inter-Orthodox Councils. This theory, of course, has no basis in either theology or in the history of the Church. Most of the Ecumenical Councils of the past were called not by the Patriarch of Constantinople, and it is a fact that at the Ecumenical Councils some popes and some patriarchs of Constantinople were condemned for heresy or for distortions of the faith. If the Church of Constantinople truly did have universal jurisdiction and a monopoly in calling Local and Ecumenical Councils, not a single council would ever have been called at which either the pope of a patriarch of Constantinople would be sat in the dock, even more so not merely for a disciplinary offence or a moral transgression but even for a most serious violation of dogma or apostasy from the true faith. Thus, the Patriarch of Jerusalem, who enjoys authority as bishop of the holy city of Jerusalem and the authority of his Church as the oldest apostolic Church which has preserved inviolate the great relics of the Holy Land, may have the right to bring together the other patriarchs and other primates of the Local Orthodox Churches with a view to resolving problems that have arisen and preserving the unity of the Church, even if the first-among-equals Patriarch has no desire to do so.

Here the question arises: what is the nature of the primacy of the first among the bishops? Is it a primacy of authority or a primacy of honour? Is the Ecumenical Patriarch the first ex sese (in himself), de jure divino (by divine right) or according to the will of the Church, proceeding from historical and not strictly theological factors? Does he stand above the Council of bishops or is he the president of the Council and consequently its member? The Orthodox Church has only one answer to these questions, which is clear and unambiguous: within the Church there is no primacy of authority; the bishop who is first by honour became so as a result of the volition of the Church, conditioned by historical reasons and this bishop is not higher than the Council. In a word, he is primus inter pares (first among equals), but he is absolutely not primus sine paribus (first without equals), as some theologians of the neo-papist theory assert. In spite of all this, the Archbishop of Constantinople the New Rome and the Ecumenical Patriarch, to use his full official title, has not lost the status of first among equals, that is, the primacy of honour. Moreover, he cannot lose it, except at a new Ecumenical Council, even if such a gathering were to take such a decision. Because he received this primacy as a result of the Second Ecumenical Council held in 382 in Constantinople, the third canon of which states: “As for the bishop of Constantinople, let him have the prerogatives of honour after the bishop of Rome, seeing that this city is the new Rome.” This canon was affirmed and strengthened by the 28th canon of the Fourth Ecumenical Council which took place in 451 in Chalcedon near Constantinople, which states: “We ourselves have also decreed and voted the same things about the prerogatives of the very holy church of this same Constantinople, New Rome … justly considering that the city that is honoured by the imperial power and the senate and enjoying the prerogatives equal to those of Rome, the most ancient imperial city, ought to be as elevated

as Old Rome in the affairs of the Church, being in the second place after it."

This is precisely the case. On the basis of a state political reality (the New Rome, the city of the emperor and senate), and not on the foundation of a dogmatic, ecclesiological imperative, as our modern-day adherents of the official Roman Catholic concept of primacy would have you believe, a small diocese with its centre in the small city of Byzantium, a suffragan diocese of the metropolitanate of Heraclea was elevated to the highest level status of the first Church of the East simply because Rome's primacy had now been extended to the New Rome of Constantinople. The theory of state law and the ideology of the Roman empire looked upon both cities as two parts of a single capital. In his interpretation of primacy in the Church, bishop Atanasije Jevtić of blessed repose wrote that primacy in the Church undoubtedly exists and ought to exist, but should never violate the conciliar fullness of each Orthodox Church. Primacy, therefore, does not mean authority over the Churches, but is a vital element of her conciliar nature. I have attempted – how successfully I don't know – to make as intelligible as possible to the readers of Politika some of the important doctrinal aspects of our belief in "One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church," a belief which we ourselves would appear to betray when through the mist of vanity, ambition, prejudice and susceptibility to geopolitical propaganda that has nothing to do with the Church and other non-material idols we cannot or do not want see the unfading light of divine truth which alone is capable of freeing us from our tragic errors and passions.

Let me sum up in brief my reply to the second part of your question. A lower authority cannot question or even more so annul the decisions taken by a higher authority. This higher authority in the Church is an Ecumenical Council or rather it is the Church herself as embodied in this Council. Thus, the Ecumenical Patriarch – in spite of his wrong actions through his non-canonical interference on the canonical territory of the Moscow Patriarchate – has not lost his true primacy of honour, recognized by all the Orthodox Churches, and the rights which ensue from it; sadly, for many throughout the Orthodox world, he has to a greater or lesser degree endangered his reputation and the trust which has enjoyed until quite recently in regard to his office and personal relationship towards him. Both of these things (reputation and trust), it is my deep conviction, he could restore in the blink of an eye; and not only restore but increase beyond imagination if he were to state publicly that he had become a victim of disinformation by Ukrainian schismatics and manipulation on the part of the Ukrainian authorities and if he were to annul his recognition of the so-called Orthodox Church of Ukraine, thereby restoring the unity of Orthodoxy and encouraging the dialogue of all with all. Such a gesture would show to the whole world just what primacy means in the Orthodoxy understanding of it: it is an uncompromising ministry to the unity of the Church wh ere the main Church plays the role of inspirer, mediator and coordinator, and not of autocratic dictator.

The Lord Jesus Christ himself and through his words teaches us that those who are voluntarily and from love the last shall become before God the first, while those who at any cost desire to be first will

inevitably become last before God and people. For many years I have been one of the modest helpers of His Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew in the sphere of inter-Orthodox and pan-Orthodox affairs (including in the overcoming of the schism in the Bulgarian Orthodox Church at the Great Council in Sophia over which he presided and accomplished a great historical labour in healing mental wounds and in reconciling brothers) and I shall dare to concludes these reflections – possibly immodestly but at least sincerely, with love and respect for his person and his ministry – lifting up my voice to God and appealing to him, the Ecumenical Patriarch, to live up to his calling and obligations, to make a choice worthy of his holy and great predecessors, to push back the stumbling blocks of temptation causing schismatic violence in Ukraine and not only in Ukraine. If he so desires, he can do this. Let it be so, let it be so! May God grant that it be so!

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