



‘Orthodox Church in Ukraine’ activists stop parishioners of Ukrainian Orthodox Church from praying in their own church in Western Ukraine



Early in the morning of 10th May 2021 in the village of Zabolotye in the Volodymyrets region of Rivne province in Ukraine supporters of the ‘Orthodox Church of Ukraine’ (OCU), with the support of local deputies, seized the church building of the Holy Apostle and Evangelist John the Theologian belonging to the Sarny diocese of the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

Taking part in the seizure, in particular, were representatives of the so-called ‘Municipal Guard’ from the city of Varash and two local deputies Gennady Derevyanchuk and Stepan Zhdanyuk.

According to parishioners of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, they learnt of the seizure of the church

building from viber group 'Zabolotye aktivnoye' on the pages of which the representatives of the schismatic OCU posted a notice to the effect that on 10th May at six in the morning there would be a service in St. John's Church.

"When I saw this notice, I immediately ran to the church's grounds. The locks had been cut off, local people, about thirty of them, had entered the church and the 'Municipal Guard' and local deputies Derevyanchuk and Zhdanyuk 'came to the defence of the church building,'" said the assistant to the church warden Sergei Seredyuk. "If our people, who also ran to the church grounds, tried to get inside, fire extinguishers would be let off at them." According to one of the parishioners, representatives of the 'Municipal Guard' not only squirted foam from fire extinguishers at those parishioners who had come to the site but also some form of gas. This can be observed from a video taken by one of the eye-witnesses.

Scenes from the video of the incident clearly show that there were no more than ten or twelve supporters of the OCU at the church complex. "And these people said they are the majority in the church community. They hid so that no one could see them. That's their community," said the parishioners of the canonical Church with bitter irony. They especially pointed to the fact that the guards who seized the church building were wearing masks and that they bore no relation to the village.

The schismatics had been laying claim to the church property on Holy Saturday before Easter. On that day, so eye-witnesses report, they decided to "bless" their own Easter breads by inviting a priest from the OCU onto the church territory, and as a result the church gates were locked by a chain.

"They don't own our church and have nothing to do with it. So, without hindrance we went into the churchyard from the other side," says parishioner of the community of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Margarita. "Traces of their presence were removed to the other side of the fence and we tidied up the churchyard. Easter went by calmly, there were many people there."

Once news got round that the church had been seized, members of the local religious community of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church got together and then called the police. Negotiations were held for a couple of hours with the forces of law and order acting as mediators.

"At first there was no result, but when they heard that parishioners of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church were ready to set up tents to keep a twenty-four guard by the church property, the police's offer was taken up and people from the 'OCU' were removed from the church," said archpriest Viktor Zemlyanoi, head of the Sarny diocesan department for regulating interconfessional conflict.

As a result of the negotiations the church property was sealed off and the police confiscated the keys

until a court rules on to whom the property belongs.

Now the religious community of the canonical Church has been forced to hold worship in the church house. In addition, throughout the day prayer services will be offered in the open air on the territory of their church.

The conflict around the church in the village of Zabolotye has been ongoing since 2019. Throughout this time local activists of the 'OCU', led by Ivan Melnik, the organizer of the 'transfer' to the newly-created schismatic structure, have three times called a gathering of the local community.

"On the third occasion, knowing that there are a great many people in the village who are faithful to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and that there are only thirty of them, they held a gathering without us," said villager Margarita. "After this gathering they used dubious documents to re-register our community."

Source: <https://mospat.ru/en/news/87215/>