Commentary by Patriarchal advisor archpriest Nikolai Balashov on the statement by the president of Latvia



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Archpriest Nikolai Balashov, advisor to the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Kirill, commented upon the statement by the president of Latvia Egils Levits on the amendments he has made in the Latvian Saeima to the law on the Latvian Orthodox Church. This commentary was published on 7th September 2022 on the official site of the Moscow Patriarchate.

'I have studied in detail the statement by the Latvian president Egils Levits on the amendments to the law on the Latvian Orthodox Church that have been made in the Latvian Saeima. One is taken aback by how inadequately informed the head of state is regarding the history of his own country. It is true, as he states, that independence in the administration of the Orthodox Church in Latvia was granted by the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Saint Tikhon in the summer of 1921. This independence, however, was once more confirmed by the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Alexy II and the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church, and on 22nd December Patriarch Alexy signed the relevant tome on self-

administration. This is precisely the same status which the Latvian Orthodox Church enjoyed under archbishop John (Pommers) and enjoys today, and for which no new laws are required. The provisions concerning the position of the Orthodox Church, which the president mentions (the bill was drawn up by archbishop John himself), were on 8th October 1926 passed into law by the Latvian government and for their time were a positive achievement in that as a result of these new laws the Latvian Orthodox Church acquired the status of judicial entity. But the laws provided for the "rights to self-administration and self-determination", and not for autocephaly, as Mr. Levits erroneously suggests. In enjoying in ecclesiastical matters complete freedom of internal self-administration, the Latvian Orthodox Church has retained and continues to retain her spiritual connection with the fullness of the Russian Orthodox Church and has not been cut off fr om her. This was the legacy of archbishop Saint John, who paid the highest price possible – the price of his own life – for his fidelity to church unity.

The persecution of the Orthodox faith in the Republic of Latvia, unfortunately, began from the very first days of its existence. Several days before the arrival of archbishop John in Riga, the authorities confiscated and transferred to the Roman Catholic Church the monastery of St. Alexius the Man of God, which also served as the residence of the ruling bishop of Riga, while the archbishop lived in a dark basement beneath the cathedral. Twenty-eight church buildings were confiscated, the theological seminaries were closed and transferred to the University of Latvia, as was the theological high school, which housed the military academy. A quarter of the buildings which belonged to the Church were confiscated, while the need to protect the legal rights of the Orthodox Church in the country were dismissed by the first president of Latvia Jānis Čakste as "not required by state interests nor the political situation as Latvia's neighbours are also taking similar measures." After the adoption of the "laws" of 1926, the Church's position somewhat improved, but the political pressure, aimed at the complete rupture of the Latvian Orthodox Church with the Moscow Patriarchate, did not stop. At the same time, from the letters that have come down to us from archbishop John we know that he strove to "adhere strictly to the meaning of the formula" granted by Patriarch Tikhon's document, he aspired to justify his trust and not once did he revert to words such as "autocephaly or autonomy, which would lead people into temptation" (letter to the metropolitan of Vilnius and Lithuania Eleutherius of 1st November 1927, Latvian State Historical Archive, 7131, inventory 1, no.28, folio 97). In other words, the archbishop remained resolute, and soon after the establishment of the dictatorial regime of Kārlis Ulmanis, who dissolved the Latvian parliament, banned political parties and suppressed press freedom, in 1934 the archbishop was brutally murdered. This crime has never been solved. And it was only after the murder that in 1936 the Latvian authorities managed to (instead of obtaining the requested autocephaly) transfer the Latvian Orthodox Church to the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, a situation which obtained until 1940. In order to do this, it was necessary beforehand – so that it would not be too difficult during the dictatorship of the 'leader of the people' – to forbid for a year and a half the convocation of the Council of the Latvian Orthodox Church, forcibly substitute almost the entire composition of the Synod of the Latvian Orthodox Church, on the orders of the Latvian ministry of the

interior, for ‘more suitable persons’, and to change, also on the orders of the Latvian ministry of the interior the statute, of the Latvian Orthodox Church in such a way that all important issues, including the election of bishops, would be decided upon only with the consent of the organs of state authority.

The bill introduced by Mr. Levits, published on the site of the Latvian parliament, declares outright that “the law reinforces completely the autocephalous status of the Church” (article 3). Henceforth, the assumption of office by the head of the Latvian Orthodox Church, as well as by any of its bishops, is now officially announced by the office of the president of the state, and the same office – on the basis of information imparted to the Latvian Orthodox Church – has the right to declare the dismissal of such persons from their positions. The commentary to the law emphasizes that it is precisely this procedure which “allows for the election to this position to be in accordance with the legal provisions and national security of the country”, while on the whole the bill will “strengthen the role of the Church and enable the consolidation of Latvian society” as the status of autocephalous Church “removes it from the influence of the aggressor state of the Russian Federation”, which – again – “meets the requirements of Latvia’s national security.”

Meanwhile, the Church was been ordered to “adjust its statutes in accordance with the changes in the present law on the status of the Church” before 31st October. It has also been announced that “during the process of drafting the bill consultations were carried out with the Latvian foreign ministry, the justice ministry and the organs of state security… The Church has been informed of the position of the Republic of Latvia regarding its legal status, to wit, that it is an autocephalous Church.” At the same time, it is claimed that the state supposedly, “does not concern itself with issues of church doctrine and canon law and does not interfere in them.”

So, the president of a secular state takes advice from the ministry of the interior and state security organs wh ere, apparently, specialists on Orthodox canon law have got together to adopt an ecclesiastico-canonical resolution on “autocephaly”, all the while referring falsely to historical references that create the impression that archbishop John (Pommers), a highly-respected man among the Orthodox faithful of the country and canonized by the Latvian Orthodox Church and later by the Moscow Patriarchate, was in fact in favour of autocephaly. A secular parliament is tasked with resolving the internal issues of church order within Orthodoxy in Latvia.

How can any of this accord with the fact that article 99 of the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia states to this day that “the Church is separated from the state”? With the international agreements on human rights that Latvia has signed? It simply cannot. And it surprises no one within our western neighbours who have been overwhelmed by an atmosphere of legal nihilism. The only thing that counts is short-term political expediency as understood by the leaders of these countries or those who stand behind them. What these decisions bring to the people of Latvia is completely irrelevant. Recently, the

same president set the task of “getting to grips with” an inconvenient part of the people. But how does one “get to grips” with them? Very simply – “they just have to be isolated.” That is all.’

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