Bishop Irinej of Bačka: Ukrainian authorities show maximum activity in persecuting the true canonical Church



*An **Interview** with Bishop Irinej of the Serbian Orthodox Church to the outlet Pećat (Serbia). On the eve of Christmas, the hierarch spoke to the outlet's correspondent on such topics as the situation concerning the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which is experiencing a new wave of persecution, issues of Orthodox unity, the consequences of the anti-canonical actions of the Patriarchate of Constantinople in Ukraine and divisions in the Orthodox world. Vladyka Irinej also spoke about relations with the Macedonian Orthodox Church - the Archbishopric of Ohrid and about the religious situation in Montenegro.*

- Your Eminence! It is obvious that some centres of power on the planet have developed a plan for the destruction of Orthodoxy, which is being actively implemented, judging by the events in Ukraine. On the eve of the outbreak of war, the so-called 'Orthodox Church of Ukraine' was created out of two Ukrainian schismatic groups, to which the Constantinople Patriarchate granted disputed autocephaly. Can we say that this move was one of the reasons for the current bloodshed in Ukraine?

- It is possible, but only in a very conditional way. Namely, it is impossible to believe that the Patriarchate of Constantinople really wanted the current bloodshed when it created its parachurch structure in Ukraine in a non-canonical manner - which has the appearance of the Church, but at the same time is not at all ecclesial in nature, created it bypassing the existing and numerically dominant canonical Church, which it itself recognized until the day of implementation of its decision and continues to recognize, because it dares not declare it non-canonical or non-existent.

Thus an incredible canonical oxymoron has emerged. The Patriarchate, which claims jurisdiction over the entire Orthodox diaspora on all continents, invoking the canonical principle that in one city, that is, in the same territory, two bishops cannot simultaneously have jurisdiction, itself acts in practice diametrically opposed to the principle to which it refers: In a city and province where there is already one, valid and universally recognised bishop, this Patriarchate appoints another, parallel bishop, who is moreover an unrepentant and unchurched schismatic bishop.

The Patriarchate of Constantinople has always known that the post-Maidan Ukrainian government, built as the most radical anti-Russian structure in the direct service of NATO and the political "West", is not only interested in transforming schismatic groups into a kind of ‘state church’, but is also very active in persecuting the true canonical Church (intimidating the clergy, seizing churches and forcibly "re-registering" parishes, terrorizing believers...). Be that as it may, for all the time of his inglorious reign [former Ukrainian President] Poroshenko would leave not the shores of Bosphorus!

No one, least of all the Holy Office of the Great Church of Christ in Constantinople, needed any special discernment to realise that anti-Church and anti-Russian persecution in the context of the war between Russia and the collective West on the territory of an unhappy Ukraine would become far more severe than it was before the clash began. This state terror has been at its peak in recent days. An illustration of this is not only the blasphemous invasion of the greatest shrine of Ukraine and the entire Russian Orthodox world, the Kiev Pechersk Lavra, by police and "security personnel", but also the outlawing of the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church and the threat that, God willing, the "pro-European" and "democratically" oriented Ukrainian state will simply ban it, if not abolish it. It goes without saying that the virtuous representatives of democracy and human - including religious - rights and freedoms on both sides of the Atlantic are wisely silent. According to them, Kiev chivalrously (!) defends their "values" and "ideals", while dictatorship, they say, has been and remains a constant feature of the Kremlin. O tempora, o mores!

The public partly knows that many indirectly and some directly - such as His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, many theologians fr om the Hellenic and other Greek-speaking Churches, but also fr om our Local Church, as well as a number of prominent religious intellectuals - timely and openly, even before the Patriarchate of Constantinople made its not only controversial, but also anti-canonical decision to

proclaim autocephaly to the so-called ‘Orthodox Church of Ukraine’, pointed out a wide range of possible harmful consequences.

The predicted consequences, which, as I said, concerned the internal Ukrainian situation, were not long in coming: the seizure of the churches of the canonical Church, intimidation, harassment, etc.

We hoped that the Phanar would not take the path it did take. That path led, as had been pointed out in advance, to an even deeper and more acute painful split of the Church in Ukraine... The consequences in the field of inter-Orthodox relations were also predicted - above all, the breakdown of relations between the Local Churches, which, as we all know, has naturally happened. I myself, being acquainted with His Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew for many years, and in fact even for decades, told him personally, as well as other hierarchs and theologians of Constantinople, about the possible consequences of ceding to political influences and insufficient knowledge of the deep problems of Orthodoxy in Ukraine, and urged to avoid interference in the vital canonical sphere of the Russian Church at all costs.

It was said beforehand that the Orthodox Church at all levels - diocesan, local and ecumenical - should be organized and governed on the basis of synodality; that only this way of life and government makes us credible witnesses to Orthodoxy before the modern world and above all before the Roman Catholics. But, unfortunately, neither the arguments of many authoritative people, nor the sacred canons, nor the experience of past centuries, nor the Sacred Tradition of the Eastern Church have been taken into account.

All those who warned the leaders of the Church in Constantinople about the consequences had in mind both ecclesiastical friction and other problems, up to and including fratricidal violence in Ukraine. But it could not have been foreseen that the conflicts between the Orthodox - whether they were initiated or were further fomented by non-Orthodox and even outright anti-Christian forces, both internal and even more so, external - would be used as a prologue and a stage for an interstate conflict with millions of refugees, destruction of cities, with tens of thousands of military victims of both sides, killed and wounded civilians...

This tragic development is the consequence of world processes far more complex and far-reaching than the poisoned relations between Russia and Ukraine (the anti-Russian project, the state persecution of everything Russian in Ukraine, especially the Church, the Russian language and culture, years of terror against the Russian and Russian speaking population of Donbass, NATO's rejection of Ukraine's status as a neutral buffer zone, the intention of the Alliance to reach the Russian borders and so on). I believe that all of us, in all the Orthodox Churches, are called to have an equal compassionate love for both sides and to pray tirelessly to the Lord of Peace for the speedy restoration of peace between

brothers. We must in no way participate in the propaganda of those forces who pay lip service to peace, but "promote" it by sending more and more weapons to Ukraine and thereby work to make the war last as long as possible...

- On the eve of the granting of autocephaly to the so-called 'Orthodox Church of Ukraine', the Patriarchate of Constantinople revoked the 1686 Tomos by which the Metropolitanate of Kiev had been joined with the Moscow Patriarchate. Specialists in the field of canon law consider this action by the Patriarchate of Constantinople to be illegal and it has not been recognized by most of the Orthodox Churches. However, some organizations that call themselves Orthodox Churches, such as the so-called Montenegrin Orthodox Church and the Croatian Orthodox Church, were pleased with this step by the Phanar. Can we imagine that the moment will come when the Patriarchate of Constantinople will start issuing Tomos of independence to such "churches"?

- In the year of granting of fictitious autocephaly to the non-existent Church in Ukraine, or rather to two forcibly and temporarily united schismatic groups - while ignoring the canonical and only existing Church in Ukraine - all official documents of both the Patriarchate of Constantinople and all other Local Orthodox Churches listed the Metropolitanate of Kiev with all its constituent eparchies as an autonomous or self-governing Church within the Moscow Patriarchate.

And here is the miracle: despite this, the Patriarchate of Constantinople, after 333 years of official consent and silence, suddenly magically discovers that its own official canonical act of 1686 was not correct and valid, that Kiev, without realizing it, all this time actually continued to be under the jurisdiction of Constantinople, which now supposedly has the final authority, in accordance with its supposedly exclusive rights and privileges, to determine the canonical status of the Church in Ukraine, which, incidentally, did not exist in 1686. There was only the Metropolitanate of Kiev, which territory is a small part of today's Ukraine, which has about a hundred canonical dioceses.

Most of the Orthodox Churches directly or silently perceived this action of the Church of Constantinople as illegal, wrong and fraught with danger for the unity of Orthodoxy and that is why they continue to recognize Metropolitan Onuphry of Kiev and All Ukraine as canonical, ignoring Mr. Sergey Dumenko (so-called "Metropolitan Epiphanius"). Our Local Church, the Serbian Orthodox Church of St. Sava, respects the centuries-old canonical order of the Orthodox Church and, adhering to it, regrets the deep spiritual-canonical crisis that has broken out in Orthodoxy, and prayerfully hopes for its overcoming. May God grant that this may happen as soon as possible! It is true that the Great Church of Christ in Constantinople shows a desire to extend its jurisdiction unto the entire Orthodox diaspora on all continents and to intervene in the internal life of the autocephalous Churches, but I believe and, moreover, am convinced that the cartoon pseudochurch organizations you mention, and others like

them, will not be candidates for recognition, let alone for some kind of Tomos of independence, though they do dream about it.

- We are witnessing events in Ukraine when the security services of the Ukrainian state raid monasteries of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, such as the ancient Kiev Pechersk Lavra, and some other churches and seminaries, wh ere they conduct searches, considering them as 'centres of espionage in favour of the Russian army'. At the same time, any books printed in Russian and even Patriarch Kyrill's Christmas and Easter messages are regarded as compromising materials for the Ukrainian police services. It has gotten to the point wh ere, in territories under the control of the Ukrainian state, services can only be conducted in the Ukrainian language. Can we find similar examples in the past?

- No. Not anywhere, not ever.

- The logic of the 'Orthodox Church of Ukraine' has been adopted by some other pseudo-church structures created in the canonical territory of the Serbian Orthodox Church - first and foremost, the so-called "Montenegrin Orthodox Church", which does not recognize the Serbian language and Cyrillic alphabet, using Montenegrin and Croatian languages, "Montenegrin" or the Croatian Latin alphabet. Could the day come when such organisations, with the support of powerful police services, will advocate a ban on worship in Serbian and the use of the Cyrillic alphabet?

- I do not believe in the possibility of such a scenario in Montenegro or anywhere else. In Montenegro, thank God, Orthodoxy has already won a historic victory over the state project of planting an unhealthy Montenegrin sect created by the registrar of the Cetinje police station. There is a unique paradox in Montenegro. Even two siblings define themselves differently in national terms: one as a Serb and the other as a Montenegrin. And at the same time, the Serbian people in Montenegro are experiencing their renaissance and their triumphant return to the public stage, which has already become both a nightmare and a daymare for the newfound "dukljanship" and "montenegrinism".

The Montenegrin phenomenon is depressing and sad. The unbaptized atheist "Generalissimo" Milo Djukanovic founds a "Church", but does not baptize his grandson in it, because he knows that his creation is not a Church at all, but takes him to Istanbul for baptism, where, for the sake of order, he puts a candle, without blessing himself with the sign of the Holy Cross, which is good, because the Cross means nothing to him. However, the era of Milo, by God's and man's justice, is gone forever. Incidentally, I have known Milo since the days of Juta Greda, when he was not just a Serb, but a greater-Serb. At what time did he lie to himself and others - then or now - it would be good for him to tell the public himself, but I suppose that he won't.

- The Patriarchates of Constantinople and Moscow are in a tragic conflict, which has been exacerbated by Moscow's jurisdictional conflict with Alexandria in Africa, which again is a consequence of the fact that the Alexandria Patriarchate, following in the footsteps of the Phanar, has recognised the legitimacy of the Ukrainian schismatics. How fraught is this situation with dangers for the unity of the Eastern Church?

- No less than the situation caused by the previous decisions of the Phanar.

- Under tremendous pressure fr om the Kiev regime, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate stopped commemorating Patriarch Kyrill and decided on final "autocephalisation", backed by a decision to independently make the holy myrrh for baptisms. This step is canonically controversial. To what extent is this about politics and to what extent is it about issues of synodality and the Church as a whole?

- The cessation of the commemoration of the Moscow Patriarch, which took place under enormous pressure from the Kiev regime, as you rightly remind us, is quite understandable psychologically and ethically. But the significance of this, it seems to me, should not be exaggerated. The Orthodox Church in Ukraine, in Russia and throughout the Orthodox world retains doctrinal and canonical unity, and this fact is the only ecclesiological measure of what is happening. The case is not changed by the making of the holy myrrh: historically and canonically, every diocese, not to mention every autocephalous Church, has the right to produce it.

After the death of Metropolitan Amfilohije, the faithful people of Montenegro strongly sided with Metropolitan Joanikije and Bishop Methodius. How do you assess the current religious situation in Montenegro?

- In previous years you and I talked about spiritual awakening and healing of the people in Montenegro after almost eight decades of violence which they endured from the rulers, whose aim was to radically change the identity of the Serbian people of Montenegro and to disfigure all Montenegrins - Serbs and non-Serbs alike. This brutal [social] engineering, unfortunately, was carried out everywhere, and not only in the former Serbian Sparta, while we Serbs - the loudest, or maybe the only ones, as if our eyes and ears were blindfolded - sang: "From Vardar to Triglav, from Jerdap to Adriatic..."

This is why there are many in Montenegro today who claim to be what they are not and who they really are not, even though their near or distant ancestors had their heads cut off for who they were. In this we see the great success of that brutal [social] engineering which was based on "dog cemeteries" and tens of thousands killed. "Fear for life often robs a man of his honour", says Vladyka Daniel in a poem by Negosh.

Our Patriarch is well aware of human weaknesses and fears. This is why, speaking in Podgorica before tens of thousands of the faithful on the eve of the enthronement of the new Metropolitan of Montenegro and Primorje, he invited those of our brethren who do not recognise us as brothers to join his brotherly embrace. Patriarch Porfirije often repeats this call, which is still relevant today.

The importance of the decision of the Patriarch and Metropolitan Joanikije not to yield to crude pressure and dangerous threats (or, on the other hand, the "well-meaning" recommendations of "friends") to abandon the ancient practice followed by the Council decision and to enthrone Metropolitan Joanikije in Podgorica instead of in the monastery of Cetinje, has been reminded to us from the 5th of September 2021 until this very day, by those who do not wish the Serbian people or the Serbian Church to prosper.

Such persons made statements from Cetinje and Podgorica, as well as from among Belgrade's elite and from Sarajevo, but it seems that most of the anger and venomous hatred towards Patriarch Porfirije and Metropolitan Joanikije for their courageous determination was found in the words of statements coming from Zagreb.

The extreme "Catholic" intellectuals - the so-called free-thinking left - showed even more anger than the Croatian war veterans. Not to be left out, the Catholic bishop Vlado Košić from Sisak, known until recently as "the coryphaeus of the ecumenical dialogue of the Church in Croatia", made a statement on the subject of the enthronement in Cetinje in one of his characteristic unbridled displays of "Christian love" for the Serbian people and the Serbian Orthodox Church.

The failure of the attempt to prevent a traditionally held ecclesiastical act, which has been carried out an indelible number of times in history, showed that when it comes to Serbs as a people, the Serbian Church and the state, in Croatian politics it is difficult to distinguish between the left and the right. Until the 5th of September 2021, both perceived Montenegro as Croatia's "backyard".

But what can you do? Everything has its end, including the historical dreams of "Red Croatia before Walloon". After all, the situation in Montenegro is crystal clear: the vast majority of people are on the side of the Church of St. Sava. Our people, although they have not had the opportunity to study catechism and receive religious education, understand better than other priests that they fully belong to the Church,

the Divine-human community of free individuals baptized in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, when church property was threatened, the people, realising that this was both an attack on the Serbian national identity and equally on the spiritual (Orthodox) identity of those Montenegrins who did not want to declare themselves Serbs, stood up to defend the church property more forcefully than their own.

I hope that the situation will continue to stabilise. The signing of the Basic Agreement between the Montenegrin state and the Serbian Orthodox Church was a good sign. After the departure of former Prime Minister Krivokapic, who played an infamous sporadic role, the next Prime Minister of Montenegro Dritan Abazovic (an Albanian by the way), acting by law, despite threats, has equated the majority Church - the Serbian Orthodox Church - with other churches and religious communities, whose relations with the state have been previously regulated. Since our acquaintance and conversation with him during his visit to the Serbian Patriarch, I have considered him not only a worthy man and a responsible statesman of the "old school", but also my own friend, and therefore I take this opportunity to invoke upon him the blessing of God (*bekim* in Albanian or, as I once learned, «шњетен бол»).

There remains a vast field of activity - for example, restoring the teaching of God's Law in schools - but I believe that with the normalisation of the position of the Church in society, my fellow archpastors Joanikije and Methodius will find it much easier to engage in the realisation of its rights than before.

- What are the relations with the Macedonian Orthodox Church - the Archbishopric of Ohrid led by Archbishop Stefan, whose autocephaly was recently recognised by the Serbian Church? How is the process of implementing the agreements reached by the two Churches going?

- The relationship, thank God, is not just good, but brotherly. In essence, existentially and spiritually, we were, are and will be one Church. After the establishment of eucharistic and canonical unity with the Mother Church, in our case the Serbian Church (it should be noted that in pre-Sava times it was part of the Archbishopric of Ohrid), and thus with the World Orthodoxy, we have the following situation, unusual at first sight, but essentially the only possible one: formally the two Churches have distanced themselves from each other (for one of them, an autonomous one, has become autocephalous), but substantively and existentially they have become closer and more united than ever before.

Our brethren in Northern Macedonia have realised and agreed that the Serbian Patriarchate is not doing anything to spite them or to persist in vain on the issue of autocephaly, which they so long and ardently desired that they took the path of schism for its sake, but that the Serbian Church, as the

Mother Church, for their own sake, as a condition of all conditions on the way to this cherished goal, demands its achievement exclusively by canonical means, through a return to the legitimate status of the widest autonomy within the Serbian Church that had been granted them in 1959.

And as soon as they took this step, the Serbian Church blessed them with not only a return from schism to unity, but also the long-awaited autocephaly, without any conditions or delay. These brethren of ours became convinced that the Serbian Church was not against them, but for them, and that it was not against their autocephaly (after all, they had for centuries been an independent, though not formally an autocephalous Church), if it contributed to the greater success of spiritual and pastoral activity for the salvation of souls in and for the people. After all, the ecclesiological and legal status of any Church in no way affects the ontological fact that all the Local Churches constitute one conciliar Church.

However, the difference between the autocephalous and the widely understood autonomous status is in fact minimal: in the first case the First Hierarch or Primate will remember during the service the Primates of all the other Orthodox Churches, whereas in the second case – only his immediate Kiriarch; likewise in the first case the election of the Primate does not necessarily entail formal confirmation of the election, whereas in the second such procedure is implied and in practice reduced to the fact that confirmation is refused only if the elected candidate is unbelieving or morally unacceptable, or if extra-church factors, that is, forces of this world, political or otherwise, stand behind him.

In short, autocephaly does not introduce into the existence of the Local Church any additional essential element, any special ontological quality, any new nota Ecclesiae, but means a system of organisation and interaction of the major Church areas in order to most effectively realise the primary task of the Church - salvation of people or, in other words, to ensure the fullness of genuine spiritual life, worthy of man as a God-created being in God's image.

Autocephaly, strictly speaking, is a historical category. It emerged quite late, after the period of the Church's absorption of the metropolitan system of government, and it developed gradually. It must be stressed that at the earliest stage of Christian history, each Local Church headed by a bishop (today we call it a bishopric or diocese) was completely independent (as we would say today, autocephalous), but always and necessarily in unity with all the other Local Churches.

Let us not forget that over the centuries some autocephalies have disappeared and new ones have arisen. For all these changes, however, the fundamental organisation of the Church, documented in detail already in the pages of the New Testament, that is, from the very beginning of the history of the New Testament Church, the Church of Christ, has always remained the same, unchanged, based on the episcopal order (some call it episcopocentric).

The system of conciliar interconnection and interpenetration between the independent (autocephalous) Churches, larger or smaller, is much more authentic theologically or ecclesiologically than a monarchical or pyramidal structure in which there are no patriarchs equal to one another and wh ere, instead of conciliarity and primacy of honour, the principle of primacy of power prevails, with the pope at the top and all others below him. In Orthodoxy bishops are elected and installed by councils, while in Catholicism it is done by one person. In addition, the first in rank bishop means the first in a council of equals (*primus inter pares*), not the first in absoluto.

It is fair to say that modern Roman Catholic theology, studying biblical and patristic sources and partly influenced by Orthodox theology, is increasingly discovering the usefulness and advantages of the principle of synodality in church structures, and at all levels, from the parish to the Pope and the Roman Curia.

Meanwhile, in a strange entropic way, we Orthodox are increasingly hearing terminology and rhetoric that irresistibly resembles that of the First Vatican Council (1870): [that one Patriarch allegedly] "has special rights", "has privileges", "has special powers", etc., etc.

The fruit of this way of thinking observed in the life of modern Orthodoxy, observed in some places more and in others less (hostility, struggles for supremacy, bickering, conflicts - up to and including splits between individual Local Churches) do not serve us well, calling into question the confidence in us of non-Orthodox Christians, who expected so much from us in the witness of synodality, not only in words, but also in action.

The sooner we humble ourselves, the sooner we crucify ourselves to the world and die to arrogance and pride, to self-aggrandizement and self-indulgence – the sooner Christ, the Lord of all things, the sovereign Ruler of history, and, at the same time, the Suffering Servant of the Lord and the voluntary Servant of us all, His "little brothers", will raise us again to Himself, to the glory of His Cross and Resurrection.

In conclusion, the system of conciliar unity between the sister autocephalous Churches is the best possible system, but when it is implemented by spiritually immature people who have not reached the proper level of church consciousness, then it becomes in practice the worst possible system thanks to them. Let us all work together to ensure that it becomes not the worst possible system, but the best possible system, which it really is!

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