Archpriest Andrei Novikov responds to court ruling of Patriarchate of Alexandria

I would like to make the following statement in response to the ant-canonical decision of the Synodal Court of the Patriarchate of Alexandria to “defrock” me, Archpriest Andrei Novikov, and Priest George Maximov.

We both act in compliance with the synodal decision of the Russian Orthodox Church concerning the establishment of the Patriarchal Exarchate of Africa and with the blessing of our Church’s Supreme Authorities. This decision, as was repeatedly explained, has solid theological and canonical grounds. I would like to point out that in 2019 Patriarch Theodoros of Alexandria started commemorating the head of the Ukrainian schism, recognized the so-called “OCU” as legitimate Church of Ukraine and then entered into Eucharistic communion with the schismatics. Thus the Church of Alexandria became one with the schism. Far fr om denouncing the unlawful deed of its Patriarch, the Synod of the Church of Alexandria in its statement established his decision as a fact of its Patriarchate’s ecclesiastical life. Earlier, all Local Churches, including the Church of Alexandria, had condemned the Ukrainian schism and recognized the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church, now led by Metropolitan Onuphry of Kiev and All Ukraine, as the only legitimate Church.

It clearly indicates that the pan-Orthodox decision on the matter has already been pronounced, condemning the uncanonical Ukrainian movement as a schismatic one and acknowledging the Ukrainian Orthodox Church within the Moscow Patriarchate as the only canonical Church. Having become one ecclesiastical body with the Ukrainian schism, the Patriarch of Alexandria himself became part of the schism, which had previously received Orthodoxy-wide condemnation, and thus “fell under his own anathema”.

Yet, numerous African clerics by no means wanted to fall under that condemnation, for they would have inevitably entered into communion with the schism because a priest does not exist on his own, but makes one ecclesiastical body with his Patriarch, his Local Church and his bishop. Those cleric, acting on their own behalf and on behalf of their parishioners, appealed to His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Rus’ with a request to receive them under the omophorion of the Russian Orthodox Church, which had rejected the schism, and to thus save them from communion with the schism, for nobody had consulted with them about the matter; they had just been presented with a fait accompli.

We are being told that, according to Canons 13-15 of the Council of Constantinople of 861, also known as Protodeutera Council, severing communion with one’s supreme authorities is only possible if the

Patriarch or a bishop of that Church publicly preaches heresy that was conciliarly condemned. At the same time, they shyly fail to mention Canon 6 of the Second Ecumenical Council that equates schism to heresy: “We call heretics both those who have long ago been declared alien to the Church...; also those who although they pretend as if they confess our faith soundly, but who have separated and gather assemblies against our rightly appointed bishops.” Described here is the classical situation of the Ukrainian schism, which the Patriarchate of Alexandria joined. Furthermore, described by the Fathers of the Protodeutera Council is the situation when a Patriarch or a metropolitan just preaches heresy (including schism), not falls into a condemned heresy or a condemned schism. In the latter case, a hierarch and those who follow him de facto become heretics and schismatics. These are not just words, not just preaching, but an action that has direct immediate canonical consequences.

That is why, by the way, back in the 15th century Orthodox clergymen and laypeople did not need to wait for a pan-Orthodox Council in order to secede from communion with Constantinople’s Patriarch and metropolitans who had accepted the Unia with Catholics. Far from violating sacred canons, they demonstrated loyalty to the Holy Orthodoxy.

Being in communion with the schism is not a matter of geopolitics (albeit it was geopolitics alien to Orthodoxy that gave rise to the schism); nor is it a matter of property and territorial disputes (albeit the issue of church territories is also of great canonical importance); nor is it a matter of national identity. Nothing can be more important than the matter of salvation – of being within the fold of the true Church of Christ or of falling away from it. There are no two ways about it. This is a matter of Orthodox dogmatics.

St. Ignatius the God-Bearer: “Do not err, my brethren. If any man follows him that makes a schism in the Church, he shall not inherit the kingdom of God” (Epistle to Philadelphians).

St. Irenaeus of Lyons: “If they don’t preserve unity and communion with the Church, no reformation of so great importance can be effected by them, as will compensate for the mischief arising from their schism. Even if people like this become martyrs for the name of Christ, their stain is not washed away. The unforgivable grievous sin of discord is not purged by suffering. You cannot be a martyr outside the Church. You cannot enter the kingdom when you shun those that will reign there” (Five Books Against Heresies).

Blessed Augustine of Hippo: “We believe also in the Holy Catholic Church. For both heretics and schismatics style their congregations churches. But heretics, in holding false opinions regarding God, do injury to the faith itself; while schismatics, on the other hand, in wicked separations break off from brotherly charity, although they may believe just what we believe. Wherefore neither do the heretics belong to the Church catholic, which loves God; nor do the schismatics form a part of the same” (On the

Creed).

St. John Chrysostom: “Causing divisions in the Church is no less an evil than to fall into heresies … the sin of schism is not washed away even by blood of martyrdom” (Exegesis of the Epistle to Ephesians).

Simple African priests and laypeople have a much better understanding of church canons and the teaching of the ancient Church Fathers than their Greek superiors. Appealing to the Russian Church was the only ecclesiastically correct and possible solution for the African confessors of Orthodoxy in the situation they had found themselves in because of their Patriarch. And the Supreme Authorities of the Russian Orthodox Church had no other option but to admit those clerics and their flock. It was their ecclesiastical and moral duty, manifestation of Christian concern for the salvation of people of the same faith. While to refuse would have meant to make a political decision motivated be a desire to maintain “good relations,” avoid “additional problems,” “keep balances,” that is to say, motivated by anything rather than concern for people’s salvation in Christ.

And that is what Father George’s and my humble mission is about, and we carry it out not on our own behalf. Giving holy antimensions and chrism, con-celebrating with the African clergymen that remain faithful to Orthodoxy, praying and meeting with the local flock, organizing humanitarian aid – all this constitutes an irrevocable step for the Russian Orthodox Church, which represents the overwhelming majority of Orthodox Christians on the planet. Do not forget that the priests and laity in Africa, with whom the Russian Church entered into communion, have remained wh ere they were – in the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. Their former church leaders fell away from this Church and found themselves in the new “church” of the Ukrainian schism. As the Divine Redeemer said, “If your brother... refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector” (Mt 18:15-17).

The Russian Orthodox Church did not encroach on anyone’s canonical territory because schismatics have no canonical territory. In the same way, in the 5th century, prior to the Third Ecumenical Council that condemned the heresy of Nestorianism and defrocked its heresiarch, Celestine of Rome and Cyril of Alexandria (!) had received into communion those clerics of the Church of Constantinople who had stopped commemorating their Patriarch Nestorios.

And the last thing. I deliberately avoided speaking about the dreadful treatment that the African clergy and faithful had often received from the Patriarchate of Alexandria, which was confirmed by great many eyewitnesses. I would like to offer my humble advice to the Patriarchate of Alexandria – initiating real persecutions against and wreaking vengeance on local priests and population who do not agree with you is not the best way for white superiors to win hearts on the African continent.

Archpriest Andrei Novikov
Member of the Synodal Biblical and Theological Commission
and Inter-Council Presence of the Russian Orthodox Church
Rector of the Church of the Life-Giving Trinity on Vorobyovy Gory in Moscow

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