



Metropolitan Theodosius (Snihiriov): ‘The world community is standing up in defence of our Church’



- Your Eminence, you initiated the establishment of the International Human Rights Alliance ‘Church Against Xenophobia and Religious Discrimination’ together with other hierarchs of Local Orthodox Churches. The Alliance is known to have been founded for the main purpose of protecting the rights of Orthodox believers in Ukraine. Tell us please what are the prospects of the activities of this new international human rights organisation and its main goal

- The need for legal protection of Orthodox believers at the international level has appeared long ago, as there are organisations in the world which have been promoting an agenda opposed to Christianity for decades. In particular, the so-called ‘right to abortion’, ‘rights of the LGBT community’, ‘right to euthanasia’, etc. These movements are, in fact, not the ‘protection of the rights’ of the carriers of those ideas, but an aggressive imposition of that agenda to people around. Under the guise of ‘protecting the rights’ of those communities, we are witnessing an open war against the Christian values and in general against the traditional values of a healthy person. This aggression in different countries has increasingly engendered various bans and restrictions for Christians on the free expression of their religious views and the profession of their faith. And all of it has been going on before our eyes for the last few decades.

And it has been taking on ever more severe and uncompromising forms.

Alongside these problems, there are the unacceptable ways of political groups in a number of countries, who, using the power gained by them, try to interfere in the religious sphere. Their ways are unacceptable in terms of human rights. That was the case, say, in Montenegro, where the politicians who attacked the Church eventually lost their power. And now, unfortunately, a similar process is unfolding in Ukraine. Therefore, it is vital that practical work for protecting the rights and interests of believing people be carried out at the international level, that it be carried out in different countries and in different areas.

- The non-governmental organisations having consultative status with the UN which took part in the establishment of this human rights association are mentioned in the press release of the Alliance. What is the field of the activities of these organisations?

- Presently, professional human rights organisations, lawyers specialising in international law and human rights, and information and PR agencies have already joined our Alliance, which will allow it to work on all international platforms, such as the UN, the European Parliament, the Council of Europe, and commissions and committees of the European Union. At the same time, our alliance plans both to work in the legal area, that is, to file complaints with international bodies, and to ensure personal contacts with officials having legal opportunities to influence social processes.

We understand the importance of media work, so our first public step was the organisation of constant informing of foreign mass media about the problems of Orthodox believers in Ukraine. We carry out this work, in particular, through the Geneva Press Club, and also through other channels. For instance, a number of members of our alliance are registered in the EU Transparency Register of lobbyists and have the relevant experience of international work in the European Parliament. Through our members in the United States, we intend to interact with U.S. senators and congressmen and contact with U.S. government departments responsible for religious and human rights matters, as well as with bodies located at the UN Headquarters in New York City.

- Your Eminence, can the programme of the International Human Rights Alliance ‘Church Against Xenophobia and Religious Discrimination’ be used locally, in parishes and monasteries, for defending the rights and religious freedoms? Can an ordinary priest or layman become its member? Is any legal status needed for it?

- The Alliance provides for the possibility of broad participation therein of both the faithful — laymen, clerics, hierarchs — and professionals from various fields: they can be lawyers, journalists, or scholars who would like to defend their faith and help victims suffering from injustice and arbitrariness in different

countries. Our doors are open for people of good will and traditional values of life, for those who understand the detrimental nature of what is happening now with freedom of conscience in Ukraine and the anti-Christian cloud that is coming in the world. Participation in the Alliance is planned to be multi-level. A few more well-known foreign hierarchs plan to enter the Coordinating Council of the International Alliance 'Church Against Xenophobia and Religious Discrimination' in the near future. But, in addition to the Coordinating Council, other forms of participation, in particular for the clergy, are, of course, provided in the Alliance. Unlike the legal and diplomatic international work, which has already been started and is conducted effectively, the involvement of broader groups of participants in this work is currently at the preparatory stage. We cannot say about everything right now. But we pray and hope very much that the Lord will direct His children's endeavours to good with His blessing and help.

- Could you tell us whether there is presently any response of the international community to the programme areas of the new human rights association's activities, or is it too early to speak of it? How can its work affect the situation of the UOC?

- The matter is that work for protecting the rights of believers has already been carried out by members of our Human Rights Alliance for quite a long time. The signing of the agreement on the 19th of December became just an outward landmark event, which recorded the status quo and gave it publicity. To date, the members of the Alliance have already carried out quite a lot of work at the international level and have significant contacts in different countries. For example, they coordinated their work with the international law firm Amsterdam & Partners, and the capabilities of the human rights organisation Public Advocacy, which has joined the Alliance and has been working on issues related to the UOC for many years, have allowed us to establish effective interaction with the UN Human Rights Council, Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, UN special rapporteurs, and committees that can take legal decisions on disputes involving states that violate the rights of believers.

It should be noted that the intensive international human rights work carried out throughout 2023 has resulted in the fact that the problems of UOC believers have become a separate item on the international agenda, a lot of publications have appeared in the foreign press, the violations of the rights of believers were discussed at the UN, and a public debate has arisen in the US media and political space. It indicates that a certain tangible result of this work has already been achieved.

At the same time, I cannot but draw attention to the fact that such violations of the rights of UOC believers as the seizures of churches, attempts to adopt the law 'on banning the UOC', decisions by local authorities to take away land plots, and ongoing criminal prosecution of UOC hierarchs are already drawing sharp international criticism, part of which has made its way into the public mass media too and even into political struggle abroad. Hence, from the point of view of mere reasonable logic, it would be beneficial for the leadership of our state to remove the agenda regarding the Ukrainian Orthodox Church

from the political mainstream and focus on more urgent matters for Ukraine. And we do not lose hope that our authorities will change their attitude towards the UOC and find the strength in themselves to stop the arbitrariness and lawlessness that are taking place in Ukrainian society towards the faithful of our denomination.

However, in spite of all the challenges and hardships, we will continue this work and involve new participants, as well as cover the problems of violations of the rights of believers in different countries. We will involve in this work both Local Orthodox Churches and members of the professional milieu in the legal, media, academic, and education areas, as well as public figures from various countries who are interested in solving the problems of their fellow citizens.

- Your Eminence, believers in Ukraine, and not only Ukraine, received with joy the news of the latest decision by the Cherkasy court to change your measure of restraint from round-the-clock house arrest to night-time house arrest. Now, you can once again celebrate public divine services and carry out fully fledged administration of the diocese at daytime. Does it testify to any positive tendencies in the court proceedings against UOC clergymen?

- Probably, it is too early to talk about any tendencies. More such facts and some good dynamics in other proceedings are needed for a tendency. So far, there is no such dynamics. I think that in this case, we can only talk about the courage and integrity of a particular judge, who took a just decision within the law and her powers. Why integrity? Because we all, both the judges and the 'defendants', currently live in an atmosphere of an unprecedented informational pressure. Pressure upon common sense. We live in an atmosphere where even mere non-aggressive attitude towards dissidents, let alone members of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, is reprehensible. This is, of course, not normal from both the constitutional and the moral point of view, but it is so. It is quite hard to remain an honest person in such an atmosphere.

- The Nativity Fast is coming to an end, the new year of 2024 has begun, the Great Feast of the Nativity of Christ is coming. What do you expect the most in the new year and what would you wish to the readers and all the faithful of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church on these holy pre-Nativity days?

- In the year to come, I look forward to and wish all the readers of the website *Orthodox Life* and all believing people a great gift of God — the end of the war. I also wish you that the end of the war may bring with it not inconsolable sorrow and incurable hatred, but hope for the unshakable peace of God and the dawn of His all-forgiving love. That the prayer of people who have survived the war may be quiet, bright, and grateful. That this prayer may be alienated from any darkness, from any impurity and malice. That it may be full of trust in the Providence of God, peace of heart, and thankfulness to God.

Only then will the hundreds of thousands of innocent victims of this war be able to find eternal peace. Only then will we be able to start living under a peaceful sky from scratch, so that the horrors of war will never repeat in our lives again.

Interview with Metropolitan Theodosius (Snihiriov) by Deacon Serhiy Heruk

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