

The Serbian Orthodox Church,

Diocese of Bačka

Announcements

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An Interview of His Grace, Dr. Irinej, Bishop of Bačka

with Mr. Milorad Vučelić, the main Editor-In-Chief of PEČAT

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- 1. Your Grace, you attended the funeral of the Patriarch of Moscow and of all Russia in Moscow. What are your impressions of the country you have returned from where the current opinion prevails that a whole epoch in the history of Russia has come to an end with the death of Alexis II?*

Yes, I attended the funeral of Patriarch Alexis of blessed repose and before that I paid him a formal visit together with Metropolitan Amfilohije at the end of September. We met him again in Constantinople in mid-October at the gathering of all the heads of the local Orthodox Churches. At the time we had no inkling that our next and last meeting here on earth would be by his catafalque at the Church of Christ the Savior. I have been residing temporarily in Moscow for the past two decades because of church affairs and inter-church meetings. Prior to 1988, when I represented our Church at the anniversary of the first millennium of the Baptism of Russia, I followed the state of affairs in the Russian Orthodox Church and in Russian – formerly Soviet - society through Russian uncensored literature, initially published in the “Samizdat” and later in the “Tamizdat” in the West, and through several dissident journals and newspapers (Русская, Посев, Грань, КОНТИНЕНТ, et.al.) This might sound immodest, but I consider myself well informed with regard to Russia and Greece.

From my perspective, former and present Russia differs like heaven and earth, spiritually speaking. I am amazed at the speedy and all-encompassing spiritual rebirth of the Russian people. The Soviet era with its most brutal persecution of the Church, by its struggle to uproot Christianity from the most expansive regions of the biggest nation on earth, lasted considerably longer than the persecution in the more subdued version of communist rule and its atheistic indoctrination in our country as well as in the other eastern and south-eastern European

countries. Nevertheless, Orthodoxy with its Christian culture has triumphantly reclaimed the soul of the Russian people and the public life of the Russian state overnight, so to speak. In my opinion, the greatest merit belongs to the Russian Orthodox Church under the wise and moderate leadership of Patriarch Alexis, and this is immediately followed by the leadership of the Russian government, which had suddenly found itself in Orthodox Christianity, and consequently, especially after the Yeltsin period, understood that the future of Russia was not primarily guaranteed by its nuclear defense, but by the Orthodox faith and its Christian culture, Christian values, and ethical code.

Indeed, an entire era has come to an end with the death of Patriarch Alexis. As a Bishop, he worked during the harsh times the Church endured under Nikita Khrushchev. Under the new conditions of freedom, he had to deal with a new burden, with inconceivable new temptations and provocations, the schism in particular. The journalist Boris Klin writes the following in the daily newspaper, *Izvestija*, dated the 7th of December: “For the first time, the Church was left to itself. There was no Orthodox czar in which relationships could be harmonized and where one could find support by the experiences of a predecessor or through the Byzantine legacy. There was no dictate by the government or by a specific authority to govern the Church, that is, the Synod or the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. There were no cruel persecutions. However, Alexis II had to establish a new relationship of the Church with the authorities, the society, and with the media ...”

In spite of the deep wounds in the body of the Church, sustained from the recent Soviet period and from the present, in completely new historical circumstances, Alexis carried out a struggle and a miracle – he preserved the spiritual unity of the Church. He also kept the Church intact in an atmosphere of disintegration of the state, of an empire to be more correct, with the Ukraine being the exception; even here, a great majority remained faithful to him. He elevated the standing of the Church to unprecedented heights undreamed of, and he established a relationship of trust and cooperation with the new, Christian, democratic, and patriotic leadership of the state. He restored faith, hope, and spiritual strength to the people and to society. In addition to this, he preserved and strengthened the trust of the members of other religions and confessions towards the Orthodox Church that represents the majority of the Russian faithful.

The era of Alexis II denotes the return of the Russian person to his Church and the great revival of faith and spirit. During the Soviet Union there were less than 40 active churches in Moscow. Today there are 872. Then, there was only one active monastery in Moscow; now there are 8 and 16 antechapels. In 1987 there were 6,800 Orthodox parishes officially registered in all of Russia. Today their number is 29,268. There were 19 monasteries in all; today there are 804 and over a thousand if you include the antechapels and the hermitages. There were scores of bishops; today there are 203 hierarchs. There were three theological academies and seminaries; today there are 87 schools of higher theological education. Presently, there are 11,051 Sunday schools attached to parishes. And so forth...

However, more impressive than these statistical figures, is the spiritual course and direction Alexis took. In this new era of freedom of the Church, many expected a new edition of the Church: modernistic and ultra-liberal, whereas others expected a Church like a large sect: conservationist. Instead, he bequeathed to Russia and to the world a Church faithful to Herself, to her Tradition and purpose, and yet, open to all – both young and old alike, rightists and leftists, conservatives and liberals alike.

2. *To what extent does the demise of the Head of the Russian Orthodox Church influence the unity of Orthodoxy on the whole? For the impression exists that the unity has been endangered through the periodical conflicts between the Patriarchates of Constantinople and Moscow. What is the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church in solving the pan-Orthodox problems, the conflicting issues of Phanar and Moscow in particular?*

Patriarch Alexis was first a great supporter and a zealous worker for the unity of the Church in Russia, second and in equal measure, for universal Orthodoxy, and finally, for the unity of all Christians in truth and love. It is true that there have been episodic misunderstandings and disagreements on a larger and smaller scale between the Constantinople and Moscow Patriarchates on certain issues. These, however, were exclusively canonical and jurisdictional issues, never dogmatic or of an essential nature. Besides this, I must emphasize that these disputes and dissensions have never led to an interruption in the Eucharistic and canonical relationship between the two Churches. The Churches are gradually and patiently working at overcoming these difficulties through brotherly dialogue although this may seem somewhat protracted. I must stress one more thing: the nature of disputes and, if you will, of conflicts in the Church differs significantly from the nature of secular, political, international, ideological ones et alia. With this assertion, I am in no way pardoning or disparaging the damage of inter-church frictions, but I wish to point out the harm of inadequate secular interpretation of such frictions often present in the media and popular amongst self-appointed confession analysts and half-baked inquisitors, all in the name of personal opposition to and estrangement from the Church, masked in a false adherence to principles.

In the past two years, the relationship between the two Churches has been shaken primarily by the conflict about the jurisdiction over Estonia. This has been resolved more or less through the acknowledgment of a dual jurisdiction, parallel to each other, between Constantinople and Moscow. However, the canonical status of the heads of the Church there has not yet been resolved – Constantinople recognizes one hierarch as the autonomous Archbishop of Estonia whilst Moscow recognizes another hierarch as the autonomous Estonian Metropolitan. Although this dispute remains the subject of dissension and negotiation, it has not been an obstacle to the con-celebration of both hierarchs at the meeting of the Heads of the Orthodox Churches in Constantinople last October, just as it posed no obstacle for them to con-celebrate with Patriarch Bartholomew and with the recently reposed Patriarch Alexis on the same occasion.

I am hopeful that this problem will be overcome in the near future. A change in the course taken in this dispute is highly unlikely independent of the heir to Patriarch Alexis. It is interesting to note that His Beatitude was born in Estonia of Germanic-Estonian descent, that he was the Bishop in Estonia for thirty years, and that he rescued the Piuticki Monastery from the Soviets...

Our Church is always ready to serve the all-Orthodox ecumenical unity, and this issue as well. The extent of Her contribution is something one should address others and elsewhere, perhaps in Constantinople and in Moscow.

3. *The events of the past few months lead to the conclusion, maybe an erroneous one, that there is not a complete unity within the Serbian Orthodox Church, at least as far as the Church hierarchs are concerned. Your Grace has also taken an active part in the disputes at the Synod about the election of a new patriarch. According to you, are the disagreements between the hierarchs of the Serbian Orthodox Church a result of their differing approaches to solving the acute problems of the Church and of society; or is there perhaps truth to the speculation that the Church has become the center of a struggle of opposing structures from outside the Church, which includes intelligence agencies?*

How do you define disagreement and how do you define complete unity? I will start with the latter. There is a complete unity between the hierarchs, the clergy, and the faithful even when they have very opposing views on certain issues. For Church unity is neither a monolithic ideology, nor an authoritative leveling instrument, nor an anthropocentric given; Church unity is an ontological unity, a God-Man unity, a unity through grace; one which comes forth from the communion in one Eucharist of the Church. This unity is not impaired by freedom or by the “pluralism” of opinions.

On the contrary, it is a given and at the same time a task to be achieved. Unity is the point of commencement but it is also developed in the spirit of universality. If this were not so, would there even be a need for dialogue in the Church? Would the institution of the Church synods be in existence? Would these synods not be reduced to decorative advisory bodies of a single decision-making person, whoever he may be and whatever historical title he may carry?

Different viewpoints do not impair unity. They strengthen unity insofar as they lead to the universal victory of the viewpoint, which sides closest with the Church, a viewpoint, which becomes the most salvific one. The trouble starts when an individual or a group considers its vision of reality as an absolute and does not allow for concessions even in the fullness of the Church’s synod. This is how heresies emerge (for the primary meaning of the word *heresy* is the selection of a partial truth instead of the complete truth). Sometimes paradoxically, those who are otherwise against absolutism in the Church, adopt a fiercely papal behavior, a behavior personified in the pretentiousness of Roman bishops already for centuries.

All this, of course, does not mean that the ethos or order of the Church can be equated to secular democratic principles or that truth is obtained by outvoting. Truth, in the spirit of love, is even less attainable through the abolishment or disparagement of the ecumenical nature of the life of the Church. This ecumenical nature of the Church applied in practice, is usually conducted as an ecumenical methodology, that is, in the aftermath of all discussions, disagreements and conflicts, the ecclesiastical synod is both able and obliged to express the Church, through the Holy Spirit, as the true and truthful emergence of the Kingdom of God here and now, within us and among us.

It is commonly known that there have been and that there still are two opposing positions in the Synod of the Fathers of our Church about the situation, which has ensued by the deep old age, frailty and illness of His Beatitude, the Patriarch. According to some, the Patriarch's request to retire from active duty should be given consideration and a new Patriarch should be elected. This is not unprecedented in the history of the universal Church or in the practice of our local Church. It is rather in the interest of the Church and for the sake of Her full and appropriate functioning. According to others it is more prudent to wait until further notice out of respect for the merits of His Beatitude who has served the Church in troubled and uneasy times, and, for the sake of avoiding discontent, distrust and dissension.

The second position prevailed. The opinion of each bishop, myself included, is relatively well known. However, does this justify verbal clashes in the media? I do not think so. The future is in front of us; time will show whether we were able to do better but chose not to or did not have the boldness, or whether under the circumstances we have done everything within our possibilities. God Himself does not expect from us more than what is possible, as His Beatitude himself has often pointed out. In any case, we do not know what sort of surprises life has in store for us.

I do not believe that any forces outside the Church or any other "centers of power", not even the infamous secret services, are able to annul or impair the freedom which Christ has given us once and for all. It is possible for an individual or for certain individuals to overlook their responsibilities and obligations toward God's Church but the Church as a theanthropic ecumenical organism has always submitted to God rather than to people, as Holy Scripture tells us. After all, we do not philosophize about the Church: we believe in the Church because we believe in the Triune God.

4. *You have likewise received the letter from Bishop Gregory of Zahumlje-Herzegovina and you are acquainted with the series of his announcements and interviews. There is the impression that a selected campaign is unraveling in our Church, which existed only in the daily political life of Serbia until recently and which we can hardly be proud of. Do you intend to respond to Bishop Gregory?*

Only personally, in a direct encounter, and under no circumstances through the press. I received his letter personally and not through the media. My possible comments to his letter are

redundant, even inappropriate, for he has publicly explained everything he had wished to achieve through his letter. Whoever is interested in it has an already established opinion.

5. *According to Your Grace's opinion can the actual events that have occurred in the Serbian Orthodox Church be considered as an attempt to destroy the most important institutions of our country by certain structures in society, so that in Serbia not even one stone would be left unturned?*

In my opinion, one cannot view it this way. I hope that I am not so naïve as to be ignorant of the existence of “certain structures”, as you delicately put it, for whom the Church’s public activity and social influence no matter how small it may be, pose a greater threat than everything else in the world, and, who would therefore, if they only could, banish the Church into deeper and farther catacombs than the earlier anti-christs and Church persecutors, beginning with Nero, and Diocletian to Hitler and Stalin. However, to their misfortune and to our joy – they cannot accomplish this.

However, one should not underestimate them for they slander our Church to powerful foreigners and invite them to disdain and to condemn our Church; all of this under the mask of slogans of democracy and in the name of “civilized society”. (As one of the worst examples, I will cite, the recent incoherent accusation of Sonja Biserko and her organization that amounts to nothing short of “hate talk”.) But they are strong only when we Christians are weak – weak in our faith and weak in our love for our brethren. In order to overcome them, we need to overcome ourselves not them, that is, we must overcome our own faintheartedness rather than their disbelief.

6. *The faithful and all of the Serbian people to a large degree are confused because of the alleged urgency by which the Serbian Orthodox Church had to elect a new patriarch.*

The Church was not forced and that is why She did not elect one. In asking this question you rightly guard yourself by correctly using the term “alleged”. All sorts of things occur *allegedly* but not *actually*. Personally, I am more inclined toward the opinion that it would have been more advantageous to the Church had there been an election of a new head of the Church – not as a “matter of urgency” or from external dictates but because of the internal needs of the Church – which, however, has not happened. The Synod has made its decision. This is the current reality we live in, we move in, and exist in, without any faintheartedness and complaints but with faith and in hope. We as Christians need to be thankful to God and grateful for His dispensation, whether through Grace, or through His permission, or His actual condescension toward our weaknesses and our shortcomings. We pray: “Our Father....., Thy Will be done”, and not, “Our Father....., our will be done”, or, “ Our Father....., may our will be done”.

7. *There is more frequent talk about the “unacceptable politicizing of the Serbian Orthodox Church”. However, when one considers, for example, the Russian Orthodox Church, one is bound to notice that in the past two decades the state and Church diplomacy have acted in conjunction with each other in many areas in the Russian Federation. In our*

country, however, there is the predominant view that the Serbian Orthodox Church is practically the only institution in Serbia that is protecting our national interests today. What are the obstacles for the members of the Church and government authorities to act in unanimity, at least when vital government and national interests are at stake?

The “politicizing” of our Church and the “clericalization” of our society represent one example of the notorious and, regrettably, deliberate lies, which our opponents operate with. For our people on the whole those are merely conceptual nouns, that is, they do not really exist (according to the formal census, half a percent of the population believe this in addition to the four and a half percent of those people who out of personal reasons abstained from expressing an opinion), and among the so-called intellectual elite, an insignificant minority maintain this view. Out of inexplicable (or maybe explicable) reasons, our opponents completely rule the Serbian media, as though they were the absolute majority expressing the opinion of the majority of people democratically.

The separation of Church and state – like in the present day European Union, Europe, and democratic world at large – does not entail, as they think or as they claim to think, the banishment of the Church from society, or Her greater or lesser marginalization, but rather the recognition of separate authorities (“autonomous ingérence”) along with the internal independence of the Church and of the modern laic state. It further means the need for mutual cooperation in all areas of mutual significance and for the general good.

You are correct with regard to Russia. Present day Russia can serve as an example and as a model to Serbia when we talk about the relationship between the state and the Church. Russia is not the only example, or model for us. You have Germany, Austria, and many other European countries that can serve as an example, even France.

We have an example in our closest neighbor. I am deliberately citing the neighboring Croatia, which is without a doubt orientated towards the European Union. (The time has come for us, who have had a state since ancient times, to envy the Croats without guile...) But is there a better example and model closer to home than the Republica Srpska that is of the same faith and blood?

8. *Lately, there has been much talk about the different opinions of the Church hierarchs regarding ecumenism. Why are certain circles claiming that this issue currently takes priority in the Serbian Orthodox Church when it is commonly known that the Church has been involved in the ecumenical dialogue for a long time now?*

This question deserves a special answer. However, for now I will answer briefly. The term ecumenism is used twofold. For some it stands primarily for Church-faith relativism and syncretism, a theory about the “branches” of Christianity and similar, and rightly shudder at this type of ecumenism. Others understand ecumenism to be mainly a culture of dialogue and see it as an imperative to bear witness to the faith of the ancient Church, in the service of reestablishing

the unity of the Church (maximalistic perspective) or of bringing closer that, which is held in common (minimalistic perspective).

Our Church accepts this second version of ecumenism, which is in the spirit of faithfulness to the Gospel and rejects the first version. The Church is engaged in the promotion of rapprochement, cooperation, and currently at bearing witness, which can be realized, with a view of the unity that existed in the first millennium, and an emphasis on the ancient Church of the Holy Fathers and of the Ecumenical Councils as the precepts of both faith and life.

9. *The impression exists that our media have played a central role in an attempt to destroy the good reputation of the Serbian Orthodox Church. To what extent, however, are the Church hierarchs themselves responsible for the Church becoming the subject of media sensationalism?*

I agree with your statement about the less glorious role of the media in their attempt to destroy the good reputation of the Church and will give you a laconic answer. Certain representatives of the Church are responsible. Some are careless, some are naïve, and there are some, unfortunately, who are far from naïve.

10. *It appears that in recent history there has not been a good rapport between the Serbian Orthodox Church and the secular media. Is there a way for an improvement?*

It appears this way but it really is not so. There have been and there still are some shining exceptions and good examples. I will make a brief mention of the writings of Mirjana Kuburović or of Milorad Ćirilović of *Politika* with regard to church issues, and there are many others. (On the present course that *Politika* has taken with reference to the Church I will decline to comment.) Would it be inappropriate for me to highlight your former merits for the series of the *Orthodox Primer*, which lasted for several years? Without your good will and support an entire friendly team would achieve nothing, nor could I for that matter.

Today's recipe? The media must take the Church much more seriously and church dignitaries must take the media much more seriously.

11. *It is not an easy task to be the Bishop of the Diocese of Bačka nowadays. The separatist tendencies of the regional authorities are increasingly forceful. Does the Serbian Orthodox Church have sufficient strength to demonstrate to the people the dangerous consequences such a division would bring about, especially in the region of Vojvodina?*

She does.

12. *Kosovo and Metohija are an integral part of the life of every Orthodox Serb, just the way every Serb is permanently connected to Kosovo and Metohija. Does the content of this statement, which the Serbian Orthodox Church has always maintained, and which is very*

logical, pose a problem to the fact that the collective spirit of the people is being damaged by subjective affirmation and by individual isolationism?

Subjectivism and isolationism exist. However, somewhere at the bottom of one's soul, invisible to the sacrilegious eyes of the intruder from outside, the Orthodox Serb continues to live his Kosovo life, the holy oath and ideals of St. Lazar. This will remain so. No malicious derision can do any harm.

13. In the past twenty years, in spite of everything, the Serbian Orthodox Church has to some extent re-established Her influence on society. One of the results of this has been the return of religious instruction in schools. Nevertheless, it appears that the educational program that allows for a choice between religious and civil instruction is creating a new division in Serbian society, which the youngest population in our country is now exposed to.

Religious instruction is of paramount significance in the formation of our future generations. It signifies nothing less than the foundation of the future of the Church and of the people. The choice between religious instruction and an alternative secular subject is unavoidable. Both the Church and the state respect everyone's right to their faith or to their rejection of faith. This choice does not create a division. The division is preemptive. It is the Church's obligation to develop a charismatic religious program. "Civil" instruction (as if the faithful were not citizens!) will harm no one if properly done. It is a mistake to think that an alternative and secular subject would act as an "anti religious" program.

14. Was religious instruction introduced too early? There are not enough religion teachers, even in your Diocese. Professors of Serbian language and literature end up teaching religion also. Once the circumstances were achieved at the end of the last century, was the Serbian Orthodox Church equipped well enough to take on the role She was allotted?

Religious instruction was not introduced too early. It would be more accurate to say that it was introduced somewhat late. One could hardly expect to have sufficient religion teachers following more than fifty years of an enforced separation between the Church and the school. However, this problem will soon be resolved. Around two thousand young men and women are studying theology; thus the teaching staff is practically already well supplied.

One should not neglect the fact though that some professors of Serbian language and literature, and other professors with a humanist educational background have demonstrated greater competency in teaching religion than some theologians.

The Serbian Orthodox Church is always prepared for Her role, or more exactly, for Her mission.

15. Although more people (especially young people) are attending church more frequently, certain church dignitaries have observed that the percentage of genuine Orthodox

faithful do not exceed the three to four percentile of the population. Does the return of Serbs to the Church out of “sentimental-psychological” and “national-ideological” reasons concern Your Grace?

Serbs like any other people are mostly believers. A certain percentage of them regularly participate in the liturgical life of the Church but this does not mean that the rest are not believers. It is not for us but for God to judge who is a genuine believer and who is not.

Our Savior Himself praised the faith of a pagan Roman officer, and He said, moreover, that He had not found such faith even in Israel. However, Serbs are not pagans (except for some which is rare, very rare). Examples of great faith, found where some self-contented “zealous” persons would not even suspect, are abundantly described in the Gospels, in the lives of the saints, in the history of the Church, and in our immediate environment.

Present day Serbs are genuinely returning to the Church, out of spiritual need and not for other reasons. The Church is no longer fashionable but is rather a desire for life.

16. What is the relationship between the Serbian Orthodox Church, your Diocese in particular, and certain “nationalistic” organizations that have recently been the subject of many public debates in our country?

I do not know exactly which organizations you are referring to. In the eyes of certain pretentious defenders of Europe and of the world from the evil Serbs and from the Serbian homeland of which I am a member, even the Serbian Academy of the Arts and Sciences, whose representatives I often work with, is considered a nationalistic organization. The following are considered even worse than that: the Movement of *Svetozar Miletić* or the fans of the Association of the Freedom Wars of Serbia of 1912-1918, whose meetings I gladly attend. And what would they say about the students who belong to the *Dveri Srpske* where I have frequently been as a guest of the Engineering Faculty? (Although I do not wish to have any contact with them presently because they have involved themselves of late with groups inclined towards certain schismatics currently rebelling against the incumbent Bishop of Žiža. It appears that they have forgotten that membership of Dveri does not enable them to teach the faith. This duty is performed by the bishop or by those he imparts his blessing to do so.)

Once one extremely zealous pro-autonomist falsely accused me of providing space in the Diocese of Bačka for a certain *National Formation*. That is sheer nonsense. We love our people, and this school of love teaches us how to love other peoples as well, people with whom we live and some of whom we have as cherished friends. Our love to other peoples cannot and will not be demonstrated in a pathological way, namely through hate directed at our own people.

17. For some time now, certain thinkers claim that the beginning of the 21st century will be celebrated as the “new renaissance”, that is, the return of humanity to spiritual values. Does Your Grace consider the global economic crisis as an affirmation of this tendency

in all world societies, and, do you believe that the crisis itself points to the futility of a worldview that in recent history professes the market as a basic law and the acquisition of material wealth as its primary aim?

Your question already contains the correct answer; an answer I am in full agreement with. The return to faith and to spiritual values is the only possible reaction to this consumer civilization of death.

18. *Nowadays, we are confronted much more frequently with the popular thesis that we are living in pre-apocalyptic times. Having in mind that we are approaching one of the greatest Christian festivities, Christmas, this would then be the right moment to remind our readers how to discover our Lord Jesus Christ in our own hearts even in most difficult times.*

All of history is a sign of the Apocalypse. However, the authentic and positive Apocalypse is the revelation and the discovery of God's infinite love towards all of us in the Person of our Lord Jesus Christ and in the event of His birth. May the peace of God be upon you, Christ is born! A blessed and happy Christmas to you and to the readers of ***Pečat***!